

# **SIX GREAT PAINTERS**

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# SIX GREAT PAINTERS

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MICHELANGELO      TITIAN  
RUBENS      REMBRANDT  
GAINSBOROUGH      VAN GOGH

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BY  
MICHAEL LEVEY



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**FOR  
MY PARENTS**



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## FOREWORD

No prizes are offered for choosing another six painters as great as those discussed in this book. While it is easy to choose it is difficult to discriminate; the choice of the painters was made for various reasons, partly to represent important schools of painting, partly because this series is concerned with the lives of its subjects and some great painters offer little opportunity to the biographer.

Beyond the life is the work. I have tried to mention some pictures by all these painters which are accessible easily. Those mentioned in the National and Tate Galleries are, as well as being accessible, available in good and cheap photographs.





# I

## MICHELANGELO

IT was on Monday, 6 March 1475, that the mayor of the obscure commune of Caprese in Tuscany made an entry in his notebook: 'this day . . . a male child was born to me. I gave him the name of Michelangelo.' And he listed in full the names and titles of the eight godfathers chosen for his son.

Later writers were not content with this simple announcement of the birth of a genius. From them we learn that heavenly portents attended the birth: the conjunction of the planets was auspicious, indicating that the child should produce marvels of intellect and art.

Lodovico Buonarroti, Michelangelo's father, seems to have paid no heed to these. He was a gentleman only temporarily occupying the post of mayor in out-of-the-way Caprese and after a term of six months he returned, with his wife Francesca and his young son, to Florence. This was their native city. The Buonarroti were an ancient Florentine family—probably less ancient and certainly less noble than they believed; they disapproved of nearly all occupations except that of gentleman and so were sinking into impoverishment, respectably but inevitably. Among the occupations Lodovico disapproved of most was that of artist.

Michelangelo was his second son. Owing to the fact that his elder brother early entered the Church Michelangelo came to be treated as the eldest, a position which was to cause him a great deal of trouble. He had three younger brothers, all in varying degree nuisances.

On the return from Caprese he was put out to nurse in a village near Florence, Settignano. There the people were mostly employed in the stone quarries; his own foster-mother was one of a family of stone-cutters and he himself had no doubt that he derived thence a part of his talent.

(For although Michelangelo was a painter he was one chiefly by force of circumstance; by inclination he was a sculptor.) Even when engaged on his vast work of the Sistine chapel ceiling he complained that painting was not his trade. His energies were in fact too stupendous to find a single outlet; he was not only painter and sculptor but architect as well, and a poet. Yet the frescoes he has left are justification enough for treating him as a painter: a painter who practised rarely and unwillingly but whose work in that medium is among the greatest we possess.

Probably about the age of ten Michelangelo returned to Florence for his schooling. His mother had died when he was six; his father remarried and perhaps had another son—though this is not certain. It is not likely that Michelangelo learnt much more under his tutor than reading and writing in Italian; later he was to lament his lack of Latin. Like many less gifted children, Michelangelo was not interested

in schooling. Already he was anxious to become an artist; he mingled with other boys equally anxious, and he formed a friendship with a painter who worked in the studio of Domenico Ghirlandaio. Ghirlandaio was among the most famous and successful of Florentine painters. Michelangelo soon ceased to take an interest in anything but art; his father, helped by his uncles, began by beating him; they finished by indulging him. At thirteen he entered as an apprentice the studio of Ghirlandaio.

No doubt at the time he was delighted. But he seems to have looked back on this period with little pleasure. Certainly he learnt sound technical methods in the studio and perhaps started his career as fresco painter by helping in a chapel in Santa Maria Novella, at Florence, where Ghirlandaio and his pupils were busy; we can only guess at what his contribution—if any—was. Soon he seems to have felt that Ghirlandaio was jealous of him and before long he probably found the routine irksome, the ideas conservative and the aims of Ghirlandaio too low for his own ardent imagination.

He was drawn to a more sympathetic environment: the gardens of San Marco where Bertoldo, a pupil of the sculptor Donatello, conducted a school of sculpture. The patron of this was the virtual ruler of Florence, Lorenzo de' Medici, himself a talented descendant of a family of artistic patrons.

Bertoldo was hardly more exciting an artist than Ghirlandaio. But the medium of sculpture fascinated Michelangelo and through Bertoldo he came in

contact with the ideas of his great Florentine predecessor Donatello. Ghirlandaio's studio was almost a factory; Ghirlandaio himself was a most competent master craftsman in a style of solid three-dimensional painting that would soon be out of date in Florence; based on that training, Michelangelo was going to be among those who made it out-dated.

In the Medicean school at San Marco he entered a world less of practical craft than of imagination. There was here already a tradition of learning and poetry, love of the classics, a courtly and cultivated air that he was to breathe more deeply. It was not long before he became a permanent guest in the palace of Lorenzo de' Medici.

He had attracted the attention of Lorenzo while sculpting the mask of a Faun. Lorenzo had examined the work and pointed out that though the face was of an old man the mouth had a complete row of teeth. Taking the hint Michelangelo had immediately picked up his chisel and knocked out a tooth.

The story was told by Michelangelo many years later and seems to have been the occasion for his entry into the Medici household. Under that roof Lorenzo collected antique statues, pictures, gems, coins, manuscripts, and a miscellaneous assortment of distinguished guests—scholars, poets, painters, and the young Michelangelo. The atmosphere was informal and the conversation at meals learned and lively. Outside, the palace was a grim massive fortress and all about it was the plain merchant community of Florence; inside, it was the scene of an

aristocratic society of all the talents, a revival of ancient Athens with Lorenzo a second Pericles.

In this seclusion Michelangelo was protected. Only reluctantly had his father agreed to his becoming a pensioner of the Medici—probably from some feeling of independence. Michelangelo was protected; and he proclaimed his sympathy with the new Athens by the strongly classical sense of his early sculpture—trying to be as Greek as possible.

Perhaps he was never again to have such perfect working conditions. Yet he did not pass through even this period unscathed. One day when copying with some other young men in a Florentine church he teased one of them, Torrigiano, into losing his temper and punching Michelangelo's nose. The blow broke the nose, and Michelangelo bore the disfigurement for life. As for Torrigiano he left the city, came later to England and built Henry VII's chapel in Westminster Abbey; but in Florence his blow was not forgotten and the generation that afterwards grew up to worship Michelangelo hated him.

Nor was the culture of the Medicean circle any more unassailable than Michelangelo. In 1491 there reappeared in Florence the fiery Dominican friar Savonarola who preached a series of apocalyptic sermons which terrified the people. His brilliant but dangerous eloquence prophesied doom for Florence unless the city repented of its sins. He drew vast weeping crowds, and Michelangelo too heard his sermons. He had had great love for Savonarola, he said many years later, and still remembered his voice.

As if in accordance with Savonarola's prophecies, Lorenzo de' Medici, died in 1492, aged hardly more than forty-four. He had been ailing for a long time; on his deathbed he received the exhortations of Savonarola and lamented that he had not had time to assemble all the books he wished for his library: a Renaissance man in his intermingling of the sacred and profane. He died also before he had had time to commission any great work from Michelangelo; the secure and pleasant life he had offered the young sculptor was over; Michelangelo returned to his father's house. In place of Lorenzo his eldest son, Piero, arrogant and inefficient, attempted to rule. Before his brief reign collapsed in a confusion and hatred that resulted in the banishment of his family, he employed Michelangelo. The heaviest fall of snow until then recorded fell in Florence during January 1494 and Michelangelo was set to model a snowman in the courtyard of the Medici palace. After this ephemeral act he returned for a few months as a guest in the household and was valued by Piero as of equal merit with a Spanish groom of his who could run very well.

But this time association with the Medici brought no feelings of safety. The mood of the city suggested rather rebellion—and Michelangelo probably sympathized with that mood. He loved Florence and would certainly wish her to be free; for her freedom against despotism he was afterwards to fight. This time he fled, with two friends, first to Bologna and thence to Venice. For some reason Venice proved

inhospitable; the three friends returned to Bologna, failed to observe a regulation regarding strangers and, lacking money to meet their fine, might have been imprisoned. A nobleman, hearing that Michelangelo was a sculptor, paid the fine and carried him off to work. Among other things Michelangelo contributed an angel to the tomb of St. Dominic in the church of the same name; in the evenings he read to the nobleman from Dante or Petrarch.

It was not this latter task that drove him from Bologna but, most probably, threats from local craftsmen that he was taking the patronage which should be theirs. What Michelangelo thought of Bologna at a later date we know: both food and people there were abominable.

In 1495 he was back in Florence. It was a very different city politically, for it had expelled Piero and become a republic, almost ruled by Savonarola. Outwardly it appeared a model of somewhat puritan Christian government; but within there was a party secretly plotting to overthrow the rule of Savonarola and Piero de' Medici was in touch with them. At Rome the Pope, Alexander VI, hated Savonarola and disliked Florence as long as Savonarola lived. Finally, the Franciscans—traditional haters of the Dominicans—contributed their weight against him. The combination of these Christian forces resulted in the burning of Savonarola three years later.

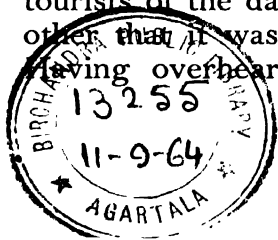
Michelangelo could not expect any public commission in the city while Savonarola ruled; art was numbered among worldly vanities in the friar's eyes.

Nevertheless there were private patrons for his work, and a Cupid which he sculpted was the cause of his being invited to Rome.

So classical was this small statue that it might pass as an antique. Soon it was so passing; it was bought by Cardinal Riario, a collector and connoisseur, as such. When he was convinced that it was modern—a subject on which a good deal of discussion was spent—he decided to tempt the sculptor to Rome.

Michelangelo arrived in June 1496, aged twenty-one. The tradition of Florentine artists in Rome was well established; most of what was beautiful in the city was their work. Michelangelo was soon to add to the number of works of art there. Cardinal Riario had bought him a large block of marble, but for some reason a statue from this did not materialize. Other commissions seem to have been offered and, rightly or wrongly, Michelangelo seems to have blamed Riario for not employing him intelligently.

Another Cardinal ordered from him a marble Pietà, a life-size group of the Madonna holding the dead Christ. At all times Michelangelo attacked his work with demoniac energy and probably he had no difficulty in completing the group within the time limit, which was a year. It was placed in a chapel in old St. Peter's and greatly admired; in this single work Michelangelo had proclaimed his superb capabilities. Nevertheless, some patriotic Milanese tourists of the day came to admire and said to each other that it was the work of a Milanese sculptor. Having overheard them, Michelangelo carved his





name on the ribbon across the Madonna's breast; it is the only instance of his signing his work. When a new St. Peter's was planned the old church was destroyed; a vulgar setting was given to the Pietà, successfully making it appear insignificant, and there it unfortunately remains.

Michelangelo's absence from Florence meant that his chief contact with his family was through letters, a great number of which have survived. Although quite young, he was already accepted as the wage-earner of the family and, as one of his younger brothers once pointed out, the more work he did the more money they all got. It was Michelangelo's misfortune to love his family deeply, even while being constantly irritated by them. His respect for his father was almost compulsive; a figure from his childhood who had probably replaced the mother who died when he was young.

Already in 1497 one of Michelangelo's brothers had arrived in Rome with stories of the desperate financial plight of the family. Michelangelo promised to help. He began to practise penury with such desperate severity that it was not long before his father was writing to tell him to moderate his zeal for economy. At the same time he wrote of the dangers of washing, championing the cause so warmly that he repeated his warning: do not wash.

Such slight evidence as we have suggests Michelangelo took this advice. His troubled and complex character was already formed, with its almost aggressive disdain of food, money, sleep; his whole life and

purpose of existence was in his art—she is mistress enough, he said. His body was only the container for a core of nervous creative energy; when he was obsessed by creation his body no longer mattered, and in the intervals of respite he was exhausted, easily worried, melancholy and lonely.

Probably troublesome family affairs brought him back to Florence in the spring of 1501. The city was still a republic, but not the spiritual state of Savonarola's day; there was certainly no disapproval of works of art. Leonardo da Vinci was back in Florence after many years' absence, acknowledged as a great artist, and exhibiting his drawing of the Madonna and Child and St. Anne.

Michelangelo had returned famous after the Pietà of St. Peter's. That year, 1501, he was assigned a block of marble, about twelve foot high, which had already been tampered with and left by an earlier sculptor. What Michelangelo should carve from this block was first called no more than 'the Giant': a single male figure the height of the block. In September he started work. He had decided to carve a statue of David and from the block emerged a huge heroic yet youthful figure, his sling upon his shoulder, whose frowning face turns defiantly to find his enemy.

The Florentines felt it had an apt symbolism for them; it was just government defying the Medici tyranny and the French who were an ever-present danger in Italy. By early 1504 the statue was completed and a council of eminent artists in Florence met to decide where it should be placed. At the end of

a lengthy session they decided that Michelangelo should decide.

He chose a position outside the Palazzo Vecchio in the great Piazza della Signoria at the centre of the city. It took four days to move the statue from where it had been sculpted to the steps of the Palazzo Vecchio. There it stayed, until in 1873 it was removed from its place for fear of deterioration; it is now in the Accademia at Florence and its position outside the Palazzo Vecchio is taken by a carefully proportioned modern replica.

Michelangelo had not worked on the David to the exclusion of other commissions. He had to produce another David, in bronze this time, and a good deal smaller, to be sent into France; he was also to produce twelve Apostles in marble for the cathedral at Florence—of which only one, *St. Matthew*, was ever begun.

Nor was he working entirely on sculpture. About 1503 he was painting his only certain easel picture: a *Holy Family* (now in the Uffizi, Florence) for Angelo Doni. This was probably painted for the wedding of Doni and Maddalena Strozzi—their arms are upon the frame—but there was some trouble either about the picture or about the fee; if Michelangelo's reputation as a painter were to rest upon this picture he would not be numbered among the great. It has well been described as an idyll of parental happiness turned into a gymnastic exercise; it is dreadfully well drawn, contorted in attitude and oddly lifeless.

The return of Leonardo to Florence had made the

city naturally eager to employ him. During 1503 it was agreed that the Hall of Grand Council in the Palazzo Vecchio should be frescoed and one wall was given to Leonardo. He chose to paint a Florentine victory, a battle at Anghiari some sixty years before. In October an order was issued that he should be given the key of the Hall so as to work there.

In 1504 the wall opposite was assigned to Michelangelo. He too chose an incident from a Florentine war: the surprise by Pisan forces (led by an Englishman Sir John Hawkwood) of some Florentine soldiers bathing. The episode had occurred in 1346. By 1504 Florence was in fact at war again with Pisa, so that Michelangelo's subject took on an added significance. He prepared an elaborate drawing of the scene which offered him every possibility of portraying the nude; and already it was the nude which was his obsession, in paint and stone. He also included some horses, perhaps in deliberate rivalry with Leonardo whose studies of horses were as superb as Michelangelo's nudes; Leonardo, incidentally, seems to have included men scrambling out of a river, perhaps to rival the figures of Michelangelo.

The Florentines appeared to be getting the best out of pitting the two men against each other. They could not foresee a series of events of which the first was an act by the recently elected Pope, Julius II. He summoned Michelangelo to Rome.

The *Battle Cartoon* was left unfinished; the Apostles for the Cathedral had hardly been begun. Presumably the republic allowed Michelangelo leave and in 1505

he arrived in Rome. Here too a different atmosphere had been created. The new Pope was ruthless, warlike and energetic; he had much in common with Michelangelo in splendour of imagination, and both men were famous for their terrible outbursts of temper.

Julius was determined to rule in Italy, and determined to mark his reign by grandiose works. He was more Roman Emperor than Head of a Christian Church. He decided that Michelangelo should build his tomb, and this simple sounding statement conceals the great project that Michelangelo designed, that he worked upon for years, and which eventually shrank to a much less grand affair long after Julius was dead. The original design, which delighted the megalomania of the Pope, included forty statues and innumerable reliefs, and would have stood about thirty-four foot high.

But gradually the Papal enthusiasm cooled; by the end of 1505 Michelangelo was no longer a favourite. There were intrigues: Bramante (the architect of the new St. Peter's that Julius was building) seems to have hated Michelangelo and to have pushed forward his own nephew, Raphael. Then the Pope himself was diverted by plans to besiege Bologna; he was anxious about money; it was whispered that a tomb built in one's lifetime was an evil omen.

Suddenly in 1506 Michelangelo fled from Rome. The Pope was angry, but so was Michelangelo. He had heard the Pope say he would spend no money on stones big or small, and following upon this he had

been expelled from the Vatican. In Florence his arrival created a diplomatic difficulty, as the Pope sent threatening letters which demanded his return. And the Signoria, who ruled the city, pointed out to Michelangelo that they could hardly go to war on his behalf.

During his stay in Florence he finished his *Battle Cartoon*; but he never started the fresco itself. As for Leonardo's fresco, the process he used did not work and he gave up in disgust apparently, pocketing a large sum of money. All trace of his work has gone. And the two Cartoons, "a school for the world" a contemporary said of them, have gone too. Fifty years later the mediocre painter Vasari covered the walls with his yet more mediocre frescoes; and they unhappily are preserved. Of Michelangelo's Cartoon we have only a few sketches for figures in it and a later copy of a portion of it.

But the Pope was waiting. Michelangelo was afraid to return and really thought of going off to Constantinople to serve the Sultan. Angry as the Pope was, he bothered to explain to the Signoria that he knew the humours of men of genius and Michelangelo had only to return to be forgiven.

Julius now opened his campaign of terror in Italy. His audacity was rewarded. By November he had entered Bologna in triumph and there to him, terrified and—apparently—penitent, came Michelangelo. The meeting passed off quietly, after the Sovereign Pontiff's first explosion of rage; his temper was restored by the intervention of an ecclesiastic

pleading for the genius. The Papal fury was directed upon this luckless official's head. Michelangelo got off with the command to make a bronze statue of the Pope, on a large scale, to be set up in Bologna. He made a clay model, with right hand raised. Is it, Julius asked, blessing or cursing? More courtier-like than usual, Michelangelo said that it was threatening the people of Bologna if they were not prudent.

Early in 1507 Julius left Bologna, but Michelangelo had to stay behind to work on the statue. One way and another the difficulties of this kept him there for a year and the enforced stay wrung from him some comment, already quoted, on the city.

At last the statue was hoisted into position—the right hand raised in act of blessing—on the church of San Petronio. Michelangelo went home to Florence in March 1508. He was not to remain there long, however, for the impatience of Julius demanded his presence once more in Rome.

A task awaited him. The Sistine Chapel in the Vatican had been painted in by a variety of painters; but the ceiling was as yet unpainted. Julius had probably already toyed with having Michelangelo work upon this; now he held up progress on his tomb and returned to the idea of the Sistine ceiling.

Michelangelo dreaded the task: he had no practice in fresco painting, painting was not his job, he was full of ideas for the tomb. In addition, the sheer physical area of the ceiling was sufficient to appal anyone: it is estimated at more than 10,000 square

feet. But the Pope's mind was made up. There was nothing for Michelangelo to do but begin.

He began, noting the day as 10 May, 1508. It is not likely that he actually started painting that day in the chapel, but he probably began his designs. The ceiling is a vast complex programme, an architectural effect of Prophets and Sibyls ranged in niches and alternated by other Old Testament figures; on both sides down the long ceiling these flank nine Biblical scenes, each of which is enclosed in an architectural framework including a frieze of nude youths. The whole effect is almost as confused as this description.

Such an undertaking required preparation and assistants. Originally the design was to be simply of the twelve Apostles with ornamental details. Michelangelo himself suggested this would not be very effective. And he says that then the Pope allowed him to do 'what I wished'. This phrase occurs in a draft of a letter of much later date—one that he seems never to have sent. The phrase 'what I wished' has led some people to suppose, quite logically, that Michelangelo drew up his own programme of decoration in the chapel. The fact that he may never have sent the letter in question has led others to suppose that he painted not what he wished but what had been learnedly drawn up by some Vatican theologian.

The truth is that though the scenes on the Sistine ceiling are Biblical—the centre panels being from Genesis—what the real theme is is still debated, and quite heatedly. But whoever drew up the programme,



it existed; assistants arrived from Florence; and scaffolding was put up in the chapel.

It was Bramante, Michelangelo's enemy, who put up the scaffolding. So badly was it done that Michelangelo had it all taken down and he re-designed it in a way later adopted by other fresco painters. Then each drawing had to be transferred to a sheet of paper, on the exact scale of the fresco, the ceiling covered with wet plaster, and the drawing applied; it was then traced round hard enough to leave an incision of its shape on the plaster. The drawing was removed, and the job of painting began.

A number of things went wrong, as well as the scaffolding. The assistants brought from Florence proved useless—as Michelangelo had half-anticipated. Then the damp plaster on the ceiling began to come out in mould; Michelangelo saw in this an excuse to throw up the whole project, but upon examination it was realized that the plaster was simply being applied too wet. The Pope thereupon ordered the work to proceed.

Most of the assistants had now been dismissed. Michelangelo painted and the Pope came often to see how work progressed. Together they climbed up to the platform, Michelangelo helping the old man. Impatient as ever, Julius decided to have the chapel opened in 1509 although Michelangelo had finished only half.

The silence of the building was broken on 1 November, 1509, when all Rome came to see the result of Michelangelo's titanic labours. Against

even Michelangelo's forebodings, the ceiling was seen to be a resounding success and an artistic revolution. Everyone could depart contented. It remained for the lonely artist to resume his task.

In 1510 the scaffolding was going up again. By the summer of 1512 Michelangelo was exhausted; but still he drove on. He had no time to eat; he was ill; he was held up by lack of money and had to travel to wherever the Pope was, begging for supplies. The strain of standing with his head raised for such long periods to the ceiling close above began to affect his eyes. He had no one in his bachelor home to look after him, or buy the food, or take messages.

While he worked his family dunned him for money, or boasted idiotically of how rich they were. His father was entangled in a lawsuit. The Medici returned, in 1512, to Florence, and nearby Prato was sacked with fearful brutality. The Buonarroti family escaped more fortunately than many people, but they were fined by the new government. All this news, in complaining letters, was passed on to Michelangelo.

In the very month, October of 1512, when at last he finished the Sistine ceiling he had to write to his father about affairs at Florence. 'It is now about fifteen years,' he says, 'since I had a single hour of well being, and all that I have done has been to help you, and you have never recognized this nor believed it. God pardon us all!'

But though the chapel was finished and the Pope well pleased, in fact some blue retouching and some gold had not yet been applied. The Pope, we learn,

proposed that the scaffolding be re-erected and the gold at least applied. Michelangelo familiarly and carelessly replied: 'I have not observed that men wore gold.' To this the Pope said, 'It will look poor.' Michelangelo commented: 'Those who are painted there were poor men.' This repartee is said to have closed the subject.

Michelangelo drew a little caricature of how he felt painting the Sistine ceiling: a man with protruding stomach bends back his head and stretches up his brush to paint. This drawing is on the margin of a sonnet he wrote describing—not too seriously—the miseries of that task.

At last it was over. Nor had the impatience of Julius been without reason. In February of the next year he died. With the title of Leo X, Giovanni de' Medici, son of Michelangelo's first patron Lorenzo, was elected Pope.

If Julius had been a belligerent Roman emperor, Leo was a Roman emperor of the decadence, lazy, pleasure-loving, too civilized to take anything seriously. By his side stood a still inscrutable figure, his Cardinal cousin Giulio. The monumental tomb of Julius had already diminished in grandeur; but Michelangelo worked away at it, afraid only that Leo would order him to do some other work. In the year of Julius' death Michelangelo contracted to finish the tomb in seven years. In June 1515 he was growing more afraid that Leo had plans for him. In November, Leo entered his native city of Florence in triumph; he went on to a conference with the King of France at

Bologna but was back *on Christmas Day*, when he celebrated Mass in person.

It was about this time that he decided on an act of piety, and on the employment of Michelangelo. The church of San Lorenzo in Florence had been built by the Medici and lacked only a façade. Leo planned the erection of this; designs were submitted by various artists and Michelangelo's was preferred above the rest. It seems that originally the façade was to be a joint work, other sculptors contributing, but this Michelangelo would not tolerate.

The tomb of Julius naturally did not advance. Nor, eventually, did the façade; to-day it is still lacking and the church is faced with a plain mud-coloured brick. Michelangelo was talented as an architect, but it was not his true profession and the façade he proposed was probably little more than an effective background for his own statues. For a long while the ideas of Leo about the construction were not certain. Michelangelo had to cancel his first contract with the executors of Pope Julius, much to their annoyance and his own. Then he went off to Carrara to examine and purchase marble—no doubt for the hypothetical façade.

In November 1516<sup>1</sup> he received two pieces of news: at Florence his father was said to be seriously ill; at Rome the Pope demanded his presence. In this dilemma he<sup>a</sup> had another letter that his father was probably out of danger, and by December he was in Rome. His father was being looked after by one of Michelangelo's younger<sup>1</sup> brothers, Buonarroto, and

*Buonarroti's wife; in reply to the news of his father's partial recovery he wrote to them, emphasizing his almost desperate attachment to his father: 'I have laboured only and solely for him.'*

Soon he was back at Carrara. He began at last to feel excited about his façade; 'it shall be a mirror of architecture and sculpture to all Italy,' he wrote. The Pope and Cardinal de' Medici were anxious to see his model; probably the Cardinal was the more profoundly interested of the two. Michelangelo did not remain at Carrara, for the Pope was anxious to encourage the use of other quarries nearer Florence; these had to be opened up, new roads to and from them built, the workmen organized—all of which tasks fell upon Michelangelo, despite his protests that the marble of Carrara was more suitable and that he had already made a contract with the quarry owners there.

A minor literary project to break the enforced labour of work in the new quarries, road building, and haulage, was his share in a petition to move Dante's body from Ravenna to his own city of Florence. The Pope was appealed to by the Florentine Academy and Michelangelo offered his services to build the tomb. Leo ignored the petition. Michelangelo was especially devoted to Dante and wrote two sonnets in his praise: in one of them he longs to exchange his life for the poet's, to suffer hardships like Dante's—but to be as great. In intensity of imagination the two men were nearly the same, both proud and conscious of being wronged; and Dante's

poetry was recognized during Michelangelo's lifetime as a profound influence upon him.

Meanwhile Michelangelo had a road to build and marble to transport. The quarrying proceeded. He returned to Florence to plan the last details of the façade—but the project began to collapse in a haze of misunderstandings and indifference. When he was an old man Michelangelo, looking back, believed that Leo X had pretended to want the façade built only so as to take the sculptor away from the tomb of Julius. It is true that Leo now allowed the whole project to lapse, and gave Michelangelo his freedom.

But Michelangelo had not finished with San Lorenzo, and the Medici still wished to employ him. It was however under a different Pope that he returned to plans for the church. In 1521 the good-humoured inertia of Leo succumbed to death. A new Pope was elected, austere, duty-loving, but foreign; he suited neither Rome nor the Romans, and soon died.

In 1523 Cardinal de' Medici—so long upon the nearest step of the Papal throne—ascended it with the title of Clement VII. All Rome was delighted; even Michelangelo thought that great things in art would be set on foot. Clement immediately had Michelangelo prepare plans: for the sacristy at San Lorenzo where the Medici were buried and for a library adjoining, to be named after Lorenzo the Magnificent. The Pope also wished to settle a pension upon the sculptor and, if Michelangelo would take minor orders, some religious sinecure. It seems

that he accepted the former, but refused the latter, not wishing to be bound to the Pope too fast.

For there was still the question of the tomb of Julius. In fact the executors, or those who were yet alive, started a lawsuit to force repayment of money owing since the tomb was unfinished. Michelangelo felt they had justice on their side; but the delay was hardly one of his own choosing. In a panic of bewilderment he threw up his papal pension—but then he was breaking faith with Clement; so he went back to work at San Lorenzo. By 1525 he had made his final plans for the sacristy there, plans which had long been evolving, for Clement had first considered the project while a cardinal.

The sacristy was to hold four tombs of Medici princes; we know the names of only two of these, the Duke of Urbino and the Duke of Nemours, and their tombs alone were brought near to conclusion. A whole series of drawings exist, some of them mere scribbles, and from these emerged the brooding effigies of the two Dukes and the figures that recline uneasily below them, still to-day in the sacristy of San Lorenzo for which they were designed.

But though Clement was eager for the tombs to be finished, his attention was more and more directed to events in Europe. Money for such projects as building became short. Michelangelo began to be worried in case the Pope failed him. As for Clement, shrewd politician when his had not been the highest responsibility, his policy as Pope was about to recoil upon him with terrible effect. In 1527, while Michel-

angelo was busy in Florence, Rome was sacked by an international army, the troops of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The Pope had to flee to the fortress of Sant' Angelo, whence he watched Rome being plundered and burnt. In Florence the Medici too fled, and a republican government was declared.

Italy was in confusion. But the spectacle of the Emperor besieging the Pope had shocked all Europe; before long the two rivals were conspiring together. They turned upon Florence.

Michelangelo had stayed in the city and he was now called upon to play his part in fortifying it against attack. In 1529 he was placed upon a war committee, known as the 'Nine', partly to be in charge of the city walls and other defences, and partly to show the people that he was loyal despite his patronage by the Medici. But the city was already hopelessly divided, unable to unite even now in face of the combined Papal and Imperial forces. In fact, the election of Michelangelo as a member of the 'Nine' was afterwards reckoned as one reason for the envy, and disloyalty, of the nobles.

Nor were his colleagues easily persuaded to take his advice. He had of course no real experience of fortifications, but he was conscientious and, amid treachery and uncertainty, he was loyal. There were already rumours of treason within the city. The commander-in-chief of the army was in fact in touch with the Imperial and Papal forces and waited only for a suitable opportunity to betray Florence to them. Michelangelo had heard some stories of this and



reported them to the government; he was not believed, and the commander-in-chief continued his work of betrayal.

Since he was not believed Michelangelo surrendered to panic. He ordered one of the city gates to be opened and fled himself, to Venice. In the hysteria of the moment he intended to leave Italy for France.

In Venice he was greeted as a distinguished guest; in France the King heard that he might get the great sculptor at his court; in Florence there was anxiety for Michelangelo to return and a safe conduct was issued for him.

Now that his panic was over, he was brave enough to return—at the very moment that the Imperial army had arrived to attack the city. The bombardment began. It is probable that Michelangelo was again employed in building up the fortifications, while his leisure was secretly occupied by working away on the Medici tombs. To him the tombs were unrelated to politics; their private significance far out-weighed their public one, and Michelangelo's two heroic captains in the sacristy are not portraits nor have they much in common with the rather negative personalities of the two actual Dukes. At the same time Michelangelo was calmly painting one of his rare pictures: a *Leda and the Swan* which long ago disappeared.

But it survived the siege of Florence. In August 1530 there was no longer any alternative but for the city to surrender. The Pope now tasted revenge; he imprisoned, poisoned, beheaded, banished, and tor-

tured those whom he could seize of the patriotic citizens. Michelangelo's own fate might seem doubtful. Yet Clement, in that case at least, could pardon; Michelangelo had been in hiding but now came out and openly resumed his work for San Lorenzo. But, we are told, he did this out of fear rather than love.

His father had been safely away at Pisa during the siege, with his young grandson, Lionardo, Michelangelo's only nephew. The boy's father, Buonarroto, had died about two years before; he alone of the five brothers had married. When the siege was over Lodovico, now an old man, was anxious to come back to Florence. Soon the family were all re-united there.

Michelangelo was attacking his work in San Lorenzo with such energy that he could find no time for food or sleep; yet he was worried by the ever-present problem of the other tomb, that of Julius II, still not finished, and by fear that Clement had not forgiven him. By the summer of 1531 even his robust body could not stand the strain. In the autumn he became so ill that the Pope wrote ordering him to relax and to take exercise; the sacristy was cold in winter and Clement wished him to find some more comfortable place of work. And a cheerful piece of news was that a settlement of the dispute about the Julius tomb was being arranged; it was actually signed in April 1532.

By this Michelangelo was to finish in a very modified form the tomb which he had started to design

when he was thirty. He was now fifty-seven—and the story of the tomb was not over. Clement had conceived a fresh idea: that the wall of the Sistine Chapel, behind the altar, should be frescoed by Michelangelo with a *Last Judgment*. This commission Michelangelo did his best to delay. Although for the moment the tomb of Julius had been settled, this period was a broken and divided time for him; probably about then his father died—and his death moved Michelangelo to write a poem, more triumphant than sad, celebrating the divinity that comes through death. A sadder poem of this time is one lamenting the loss of Florentine liberty (for the Pope had reinstated his family as rulers), yet this too ends with the thought of hope—which triumphs even over the Medici despotism. It was a period of the unachieved for Michelangelo; he went to Rome in 1534 and the sacristy in Florence was then unfinished. Towards the very end of his life he was asked for his plans so that it might be completed, with them as base; he was old, he had been in the habit of working out details as he came to them, and no plans were ever sent to Florence. The sacristy remains uncompleted.

In 1534 Clement VII died. The new Pope, Paul III, was an energetic and imperious figure who was not content with having Michelangelo in his service but employed also, as will be found in the next chapter, Titian.

Paul started by demanding that Michelangelo enter his service, but the sculptor, thinking of the

Julius tomb still to be executed, refused. Yet he did not dare to leave Rome, much as he longed to. In fact he was never to make his home elsewhere for the rest of his life.

Nor could he resist for long the Papal demands. In 1535 he was appointed chief architect, sculptor, and painter at the Vatican. The executors of Julius once more had to give way before the insistence of the successors of that Pope; this time they submitted with good grace and the energies of Michelangelo were again absorbed in the Sistine Chapel.

His task was no less colossal than before, and he was a considerably older man. Briefly, the *Last Judgment* is probably the biggest picture in the world, forty-five foot high and forty foot broad. It was begun in April 1536 and finished in October 1541. Its vast area brings together the two zones of Heaven and Hell, both packed with writhing naked figures; all is centred upon Christ Who rises threateningly from His judgment seat, one hand raised to strike down the wicked. About Him crowd the Saints and Apostles imploring not mercy but vengeance; in a space below angels sound the last trumpets of doom and some blessed souls are borne to Heaven. But underneath, the wicked are carried by demons into Hell and at the dark right-hand bottom corner stands Minos, supreme judge of Hell.

The upper part of this fresco was unveiled in 1540, but already there had been rumours of blasphemy since all the persons, including Christ, were shown naked. When the opinion of the Papal chamberlain

on the picture was asked he replied that it suggested to him a bathing establishment. For this Michelangelo put his portrait into the fresco—as Minos in Hell. The chamberlain complained to the Pope, who answered that nothing could be done; not even a Pope could bring someone out of Hell.

Even the great literary journalist of the day, Pietro Aretino, pretended to be shocked by the nudities in the fresco. The Pope, however, is said to have burst into prayer at sight of it. And among artists its fame was immediate; soon people were setting out for Rome to see it above all. It was copied and re-copied, and pleased the Pope enough for him to commission two more frescoes from Michelangelo, for another chapel in the Vatican. Nevertheless, under later Popes the nudities were covered up by painted drapery.

The new frescoes again caused delay on the tomb of Julius, a last delay, for now it was agreed that Michelangelo should finish his statue of *Moses* destined for the tomb—and that alone. The other statues that had been started were to be finished by a minor craftsman. So the grand scheme of Julius shrank to this, and what the tomb ultimately became was placed in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli: a memorial dominated by the *Moses*, and even that, by intention or accident, was not quite completed.

The last arrangement about the tomb was reached only after frustrating delays for Michelangelo, who was too tortured by the whole affair to paint or think of painting. But though he had now grown old his

pre-eminence had won him a special place amid his contemporaries. Two men came to know him and to write about him while he was still alive. One of these, a mediocre artist but a useful biographer of other artists, was Giorgio Vasari. Admittedly, what Vasari wrote in the first edition of his book was inaccurate enough for the other, Ascanio Condivi, a pupil of Michelangelo's, to undertake a more truthful biography—inspired no doubt by Michelangelo himself.

In Rome Michelangelo had friends, a private and austere circle who included a noble widow, Vittoria Colonna, a pious poetess who exchanged letters and verses with him; while another side of him was drawn to platonic love for young men, who would receive drawings and sonnets touchingly inscribed. There was also the peasant in Michelangelo—perhaps it was part of his vigour—and that was amused by pranks of buffoons who were sometimes artists.

When working upon the *Last Judgment* Michelangelo had once fallen from the scaffold and damaged his leg. Now his last pieces of fresco painting, two scenes from the life of St. Peter and of St. Paul, were interrupted by illness, and the pictures themselves seem to show a cold and failing spirit. In 1544 he was taken ill at Rome and his nephew, Lionardo, at once travelled to visit him. Unfortunately Michelangelo misunderstood the haste; Lionardo received a letter of rebuke, in which the old suspicious sculptor accused him of coming in the hope that he, Michelangelo, would be dead. When again, in 1546,

Michelangelo fell ill. Lionardo risked a journey to Rome again, and perhaps this time was better welcomed.

Michelangelo was in fact far from dead. But he was old, and tired. He did not cease work, however. He wrote some of his most moving poems on the gradual decay of faculties, and the impotence which age brings with it. He was drawing ceaselessly, again and again on the subject of the Crucifixion.

Then he turned once more to the subject of his earliest great work, the *Pietà*. He started two marble groups of this, very different in manner from the controlled and polished group in St. Peter's. The late figures are elongated and extreme, grief-laden and almost wild in their pathos; in one of these *Pietà* groups, that in the Cathedral at Florence, Christ is mourned by the dominant figure of Nicodemus and the face is probably that of Michelangelo himself. This group he destined, it is thought, for his tomb.

One other last great work remained. In 1547 he had been appointed architect-in-chief of St. Peter's. Bramante, his old rival, was now dead. Under many different architects and with many changes of plan a new cathedral was being produced; part of Michelangelo's handicap in trying to make a single plan that should be adhered to was the jealousy of rivals and the disloyalty of workmen. At the same time he continued to refuse any pay for this office. He had only one weapon—to threaten to resign; he had only one support, of variable quality, in the reigning Pope.

In 1549 Paul III, exhausted by anger at his

ungrateful family, died. The next Pope took the name Julius; the name was of good omen perhaps to Michelangelo for Julius II had been a great patron, and so Julius III also proved. Vasari—who by this time knew Michelangelo well—says that Julius III would seat the old sculptor by his side when they talked together. While he lived the Pope supported Michelangelo's plans for St. Peter's; they advanced, despite intrigues and opposition.

Among the opposition, it proved, was the next Pope. On the death of the friendly Julius in 1555, Marcellus II ascended the throne, a man already a declared opponent. At this even Michelangelo began to despair, thinking to leave Rome and return home to Florence. By a happy coincidence—for Michelangelo—the Pope died soon and the new Pope, Paul IV, pressed him to stay and finish his work at St. Peter's.

It was the cupola that Michelangelo determined to complete, before yielding to his friends' insistence and retiring to Florence. There was now money to spend upon St. Peter's. Michelangelo was eighty but he would not quit the work. So afraid were his friends that he might die and leave the cupola still unbuilt that they begged him to construct a wooden model; from this if necessary the cupola itself could afterwards be erected.

Meanwhile, as Michelangelo toiled on, Paul IV died and was succeeded by Pius IV. Again the Pope supported Michelangelo, confirming him in office and giving him the fullest authority. But the huge task of



carrying out his plans for St. Peter's was never realized; rather, it was distorted to such an extent, after his death, that the building can no longer be claimed as his. Even the wonderful dome is not quite as Michelangelo designed it, while the present façade of the church is nothing to do with him and has ruined the visual effect of the dome.

Michelangelo still found time for work other than St. Peter's. He also designed a new church the Florentines meant to build at Rome; in such cases all he could do was to send a rough model or scribble a sketch of his proposal. One such sketch had been sent to a sculptor at Milan and in 1560 this sculptor, Leoni, modelled Michelangelo's profile for a medal: one of the few authentic portraits of Michelangelo that we possess. On the reverse Michelangelo asked to have, as a symbol, a blind man led by a dog, with this inscription: I shall teach the wicked Thy ways and may the Impious turn to Thee.

In such a mood Michelangelo might have been thought to be peacefully approaching death. Although now ill, suffering from sleeplessness, he remained active and quite capable of the earlier fits of temper. His nephew Lionardo had, at last, married and had a son—just as Michelangelo had for so long urged him to; but Lionardo received as many letters of rebuke as formerly, for his bad handwriting, and for making a great show of his son's christening. At Rome Michelangelo lived as poorly as ever, becoming more eccentric in behaviour, but by no means senile.

He had always possessed colossal energy and now could not rest. In the winter of 1563-4 his health began to weaken and by the New Year he was known to be seriously ill. Yet he must be about, and on 14 February 1564 he was found by a friend walking in the rain, for he said, 'I am ill, and cannot find rest anywhere.' The next day he was too weak to write to Lionardo, but he signed a letter asking him to make a last journey to see him. The weather was cold. Michelangelo tried to get up and go out riding in the evening—as he usually did. He could not; rather than go to bed he settled before the fire in an easy chair. Because of the bad weather his friends had told Lionardo to delay his travelling, but by 17 February they urged him to come whatever the weather or it would be too late. Michelangelo died on 18 February. Three days later Lionardo, who had come post haste, reached Rome.

For a long time the Duke of Florence, a Medici of the younger branch of the family, had been hoping to tempt Michelangelo back to Florence. It was now his body which, secretly, was brought from Rome (where the Romans had hoped to bury him) to Florence and given a magnificent funeral. The Duke had created an Academy of Art in 1563 and Michelangelo had been elected its leader. All the Florentine artists had voted unanimously for him and each now gave his contribution to a great catafalque set up in Michelangelo's honour; it was made of wood and plaster, destined to last scarcely longer than that snowman which Michelangelo had modelled, seventy

years before, in the courtyard of the Medici palace at Florence.

The death of Michelangelo was felt as a public loss. The Academy in Florence transported his body across the city by night, but when the citizens realized what this procession was they came in hundreds to join its mournful train. For so long had Michelangelo been the greatest figure in the Italian arts that his dominant personality could never be forgotten. During his lifetime he had been the subject of biography, he had been introduced into dialogues by more than one literary person, and he had contributed to literature by his poems (which were soon to be issued publicly). Since his death he has continued to be the subject of biography, discussion, controversy, until the literature amassed about his name is now terrifying in its scope and quantity.

About his genius his contemporaries had no doubt; as early as 1506 (when he was only thirty-one) Pope Julius II had recognized that his caprices were those of a great man and that great men must be humoured. At the end of his life Michelangelo had a few friends who were almost idolaters: painters, like Vasari, and sculptors, like the boastful Benvenuto Cellini, who believed he was the greatest artistic figure of their age or any other. So they said even that his birth had been attended by a remarkable conjunction of the stars: a fitting tribute to the revolutionary that, from the first, Michelangelo was.

With him a whirlwind entered the comparative

calm of the arts; he unleashed a concept of energy which was expressed, for him, in the human body—and in that alone. Nothing in his paintings, or in his letters, or in what is recorded about him, reveals any interest in the natural world; colour he handled competently but with no real pleasure—he was too much a sculptor for that. We know that he disapproved of portraits in general and of pictures which were merely full of the natural world well observed, like landscapes and trees and houses; that sort of picture, he said, did well enough for nuns and women.

Michelangelo went back to a classical ideal: the body. It had been the subject of the greatest Greek sculpture, but the Greeks had treated the body in repose, beautiful for what it was, calm, dignified and noble. To Michelangelo—a sincere Christian, not a pagan—the body could be beautiful, but a torment also; for him it was a symbol of endeavour, of agony, of the aspiration which we all feel. It could not therefore be modelled placidly any more than he could create in placidity. We know that when he was sculpting he worked often in an ecstasy of fervour which sent the marble chips flying. He would bite so deep into the stone with his chisel that sometimes he hacked out too much—and the block was ruined.

So in his paintings—in the Sistine Chapel above all—the air is tense with the muscular heave and sway of bodies. What has created these titanic beings is not observation but vision. There is about Michelangelo an Old Testament ruthlessness and grandeur which suits the sculptor of *Moses* and the painter of

the scenes of the Sistine ceiling. The frescoes from Genesis are conceived themselves, as the visions of the gigantic prophets who brood along their borders: we see God thrust out a hand to summon into existence the round gong of the sun; He parts the waters with an imperious gesture; and, in the most famous scene of all, He leans out from a swirling group of angels to set tingling the finger-tip of Adam with life and energy. In each of these Michelangelo illustrates his idea of the dynamic by grand movement and sweeping lines as foreboding, and as impressive, as approaching thunder-clouds.

He felt the effort of his own work and on a *Deposition from the Cross* which he drew he wrote beneath: 'They do not think how much blood it costs.' The line is from Dante but the reference is double: to Christ crucified and to Michelangelo crucified. Speaking of art he once said that Intelligence, Diligence, and Time, were all necessary; he added that the birth of works of art is like the birth of animals—the longer the gestation the higher the creation. It is not surprising that his frescoes require to be seen again and again before they are fully understood—and even then much is missed. Michelangelo was among the most intellectual and literate of painters and even his most casual-seeming drawings are impregnated with thought.

Despite his emphasis upon effort and his wrestling with the medium to drag from it his vision, he was capable of wonderful speed. Once, when he wished to do a favour for a young artist, he took a piece of

paper and chalk and—in a minute—sketched a Hercules; that drawing, says someone who had presumably seen it, was so carefully executed it might have taken a month to do. And on the Sistine ceiling Michelangelo often worked without any preliminary tracings to guide him—painting at that height, and in those circumstances, exactly what he knew would be effective.

He was an old man when he came to the wall of the *Last Judgment*. The energy still blazed in him, but it has emerged strangely bitter and cruel. That vision has sometimes been compared to Savonarola's—whose voice Michelangelo never forgot—but its harshness recalls rather the early Christian Fathers. One of these, Tertullian, says that he will laugh at the Day of Judgment to see the damned—and Michelangelo's extraordinary scene is full of triumph over the sinners, the souls that are hurled by demons into eternal night.

There is no paradise; perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that if paradise is a place of rest Michelangelo could not conceive it. Heaven is a place of busy goading saints, pressing upon the angry Apollo-like Christ with shriller cries of vengeance, while the Madonna shrinks powerless from the horrid spectacle.

We cannot force from Michelangelo the secret of his own restless nature, itself doomed to fight through the world for nearly ninety years. He has often been compared to Beethoven who also seemed to pass, through storm, into a private universe—of which his

last music offers us a glimpse. In Michelangelo there was an eternal dissatisfaction—as there is in every artist—and it fretted his body into that of an aged, eccentric man, sleepless, ill, the prey of his own imagination: the man whose restlessness sent him out four days before his death to wander in the pouring rain.

What he had created in painting could be copied but not created again. His followers were doomed to make fools of themselves, and his energy was caricatured in pictures no better than wrestling matches (in fact the sort of picture Michelangelo had once produced as a young man in the '*Doni*' *Madonna*). They felt really that nothing could equal his achievement; they were touched by the premonition of decay, and it must have seemed as if painting had no more to do.

But painting did not die. And if the kingdom of the arts had suffered the loss of one genius it gained another. Michelangelo died in the February of 1564; in the April Shakespeare was born.

## II

### *TITIAN*

ABOUT 1490 a soldier, Gregorio Vecelli, came down to Venice from his home in the mountains, bringing with him his young son. The family of Vecelli had for generations been soldiers. But Gregorio's son was intended for a very different career and this career was the purpose of their visit to Venice.

Titian was then about ten years old. He had travelled some seventy miles, the first journey of his life, from the small isolated town of Pieve di Cadore up in the Alps. He entered Venice while it was still at the height of its prosperity, and it became his home. Work was to call him to other parts of Italy but he always returned as soon as possible to Venice; he became one of the sights of the city; he was alive and working there until 1576, mythically old, still active: perhaps the greatest painter Venice ever had.

Venice, as Titian knew it, was a crowded busy city, one of the richest in Europe, and one of the most independent. Built on a few small islands in a lagoon, its position at the extreme north-east of Italy gave it great power as the centre of trade between East and West. Its ships voyaged over most of the known world, and to build them timber was floated down to Venice from the forests near Titian's birthplace.

The buildings of Venice expressed the pride of its



citizens and of its rulers, the Doge and Senate. Splendour was limited by space—every inch of ground that could be saved from the water was needed; so the Venetians were not so much great architects as great decorators. They loved colour, and their proximity to the East gave them a love of barbaric effects: gold bulbous domes, glittering façades of mosaic. They decorated their buildings only on the walls that face the spectator, those that look on to the canals which intersect the city instead of streets. From the back the palaces are often squalid or drab, but Venice is like a stage set: to be seen only from certain angles. Then, despite the sun and the salt air which have sucked out of it so much colour, it rises enchanted from the water, as dazzling as when Titian first saw it.

His home town of Pieve was very different. It has remained almost as isolated among the mountains as it was then. A house is kept as Titian's but the cottage in which, traditionally, he was born has now been destroyed. In Pieve Titian's family were well known citizens but not very wealthy ones; his father held a number of different positions, that of Commander of the troops being the most important. Gregorio married a certain Lucia, whose surname we do not know, and their first child was Francesco. He too became a painter, and possibly he went down to Venice to be apprenticed at the same time as Titian. Titian was christened Tiziano, after a saint of this name popular in his father's family. After him were born two girls, Caterina and Orseola.

There is a story that Titian as a child painted a Madonna on a wall of his birthplace, using the juice of flowers for paints. But the picture, which was still being shown at Pieve a hundred years ago, was probably the result of the story, for it was quite modern. Even Titian would have had difficulty in doing much with the juice of flowers. However, it is probable that somehow he early showed his talent for painting, and that this induced his father to take him to the nearest big city so that he could enter a painter's studio.

Venice and Florence were then the two main centres of painting in Italy. Florentine painting had first led, and its influence was felt by the greatest Venetian painter of Titian's youth: Giovanni Bellini. Titian was fortunate enough to enter his studio.

Bellini was a magnificent colourist, like all the Venetian painters. The opulence he gave to his pictures came from his use of light; it was this use of light in moulding objects, its play about people's faces, trees, houses, that he had learnt partly from the Florentines. Unlike them, however, he did not apply his knowledge scientifically. The atmosphere of Venice was less austere; the Venetians took great pleasure just in things seen and in having pictures almost like mirrors: reflecting back the luxury they indulged in their clothes and houses. The Renaissance had made man feel more at home in the world. There was now time for the senses to be indulged, and, as the Venetians enjoyed music, landscapes and beautiful

women, they soon wanted these things in their pictures too.

This taste was growing about the time that Titian would be leaving Bellini's studio. He would have learnt there all that Bellini could teach. But also there he had met a young man who was slightly his elder, and this meeting probably mattered more to him. The young man was Giorgione. He too had come from a town outside Venice, Castelfranco, and, after a period with Bellini, had begun to paint in a new style which had quickly made him famous.

Bellini's work had been chiefly for churches, although he had painted some secular pictures and a few portraits. The Venetians were not by nature very religious, any more than they were intellectual, and they were probably more interested in the colour of Bellini's pictures and the landscapes he inserted in the backgrounds than in the religious sentiment. Now Giorgione took country scenes and filled them with a few Venetians picnicking or playing music, or resting half naked in the shade while shepherds piped to their flocks. There were no specific subjects for these pictures; they were called by the Venetians 'poems', and this meant that they were just dreamy romantic idylls, celebrating nothing except the pleasures of youth and love.

Giorgione himself was still young, and he was said to be very much in love. The idea of painting the emotion of love not as something we give God but give each other was quite new. It was part of the Renaissance emphasis upon the individual and the

importance of his feelings. Slowly the humanity spread to pictures of sacred subjects. Giorgione's Madonna and Child are hardly more than a beautiful girl and her baby, and his saints are romantic young Venetians dressed up in fancy costume.

Titian's first pictures were of this type. But we know nothing of what Titian was specifically engaged on until he emerges, about 1507, as helping Giorgione to decorate the German merchant house at Venice. Painted façades were often commissioned in place of inlaid marble or mosaic; unfortunately the plaster soon flaked off in the salt air, and the decorations of Giorgione and Titian have been almost entirely lost. We know that there was no other object except decoration in this scheme—some nudes and some smartly dressed men were included as part of Titian's contribution. As the commission had been publicly given to Giorgione, it looks as if it was friendship for Titian which made him offer the younger painter a share.

There was probably competition as well as friendship between the two. It must have seemed to contemporaries that here were a pair of painters who were destined to capture all the patronage of Venice; both were young, talented, full of new ideas, and eager for fame. It is all the more sad that the sole work on which they collaborated has perished. Even during Titian's lifetime there was a muddle about which painter had painted which façade of the German merchant house; stories were told of Giorgione's jealousy of Titian and though they are

probably not true the work Titian had done must have brought him into general notice.

Two or three years afterwards Titian had commissions from cities beyond Venice: Vicenza and Padua. He went to Padua in 1511 to paint some frescoes but before that his position at Venice had already improved. Venice had lately been attacked by the Pope and the joint powers of France and Spain. Titian's home town had been besieged and the castle there burnt. A promising young Venetian painter, Sebastiano Luciani, left the city during these upheavals and went to Rome where he stayed. Then in 1510, Venice having repulsed her enemies, plague attacked the city; among its victims was Giorgione.

When Titian returned from Padua he was virtually without a rival. One painter, Palma Vecchio, might have seemed to offer competition; but Palma was his junior, died before him, and never developed very excitingly. However, he did influence Titian—the last Venetian influence Titian underwent—and the preference they both showed for the same type of bold blonde woman in their pictures led to a story that their model was Palma's daughter Violante. It followed naturally that Titian loved her passionately. There are enough difficulties in this legend to prove its insubstantial origin: Palma never married, nor have we any record of his illegitimate children (even presuming he had any); while at the time Titian was painting the Palmesque type of woman Violante could have been, judging from her father's age, hardly more than ten.

Titian was now the leading painter of his generation. Yet Bellini was not dead; in fact he was engaged on some large pictures in the Hall of Grand Council in the Doges' Palace. This scheme of decoration had been started many years before by the Senate, and Bellini had been the chief painter employed by them for thirty years. He had a broker's patent, as it was called, which brought him a yearly income and the duty of painting the portrait of the Doge whenever required.

Titian determined to make a bid for work in the Hall of Grand Council. At the end of May 1513 he appealed to the Senate in a petition which nicely mixes flattery and ambition. First he pointed out that many great lords, including the Pope, had tried to tempt him to leave Venice and enter their service. But he preferred to stay and serve his city. 'I am therefore anxious,' he goes on, 'to paint in the Hall of Grand Council . . . the canvas of the Battle, so difficult that no one has yet had the courage to attempt it.' As his reward he asks for 'the first broker's patent for life that shall fall vacant . . . on the same conditions as are conceded to Messer Giovanni Bellini.'

This bold appeal succeeded. The Council of Ten who heard the petition, granted it 'with all the conditions attached'. A few days later they ordered State funds to pay for Titian's two assistants who would help him on the huge picture.

Titian was immediately placed on an equal footing with Bellini. A rival had, at one blow, entered Bellini's

domain and claimed the same right of a broker's patent; also he was to start on the *Battle*, a picture planned to represent a Venetian victory, but which no one so far had cared to tackle. The space reserved for it was a dark spot between two windows; even Titian, after his first enthusiasm, disliked the commission.

Meanwhile, Bellini and his supporters must have taken steps to protest about the intruder. In March 1514 the Council revoked its previous decrees: Titian should not receive the first patent available nor would the State continue to pay for his assistants. The incentive, and the means, to paint the *Battle* were gone. Titian stopped work on it.

But he counterpetitioned in November. He asked for the actual patent that would be available when Bellini died and repeated his request to have two assistants paid for. The Council was clearly a variable body and indeed it was led at different times by different trios of Senators. On Titian's fresh petition, it gave in to him: he could continue to work on the original conditions, and the Council now wanted two pictures from him.

Oddly enough Titian himself seems to have taken little notice of this permission. In his studio were two sketches for the two pictures and there they remained. The studio roof leaked and, afraid that the sketches would be spoilt, the Council agreed to pay a small sum to have it repaired. Nothing else happened.

At the end of the next year, 1515, a thorough investigation was ordered into the whole question of

pictures for the Doges' Palace. As always in such investigations, it was discovered that the project had cost a great deal too much money. All the painters were to be dismissed and new arrangements to be made. What the State must choose was the 'best artist'; terms were to be arranged with him before each picture was supplied.

The influence behind this new businesslike proposal was very probably Titian. And no doubt he designated himself as the 'best artist'. Further, he presented yet another petition—to the Doge. He asked modestly that he might finish the picture on which he was engaged, for which he would charge four hundred ducats. Again he pressed for the reversion of Bellini's patent on the old painter's death. Acquiescent in the latter condition, the Council cut his payment to three hundred ducats and told him to proceed.

In November 1516 Bellini died. Upon this a new resolution was passed by the Council forbidding Titian to take up the patent available. This was perhaps the last attempt by the pro-Bellini party to oust Titian from the succession. For some reason or other it failed. We happen to know that Titian began to receive his new pension straight away. He had achieved the post for which he had been fighting for three years: the State had accepted him as their official painter.

What Titian had gained is clear. What the State gained is a tangled story, and a sad one. Although his position depended on the Council's favour, Titian did not hurry to complete the two pictures he had



promised them. It was only after threats that they got one in 1523; the *Battle* did not reach the Doges' Palace until 1538. There was a great fire in the Palace in 1577, a year after Titian's death: both pictures were destroyed, as well as those that Bellini had painted in the same room. The State, Bellini and Titian had struggled among each other for many years about pictures for the Hall of Grand Council. After the fire, the room had to be re-built and the painters of that day set to work again to decorate its naked walls.

One reason why, after 1516, Titian delayed work on the State's pictures is that he had a new patron. Alfonso d'Este, the Duke of Ferrara, came from a rich and cultivated family; he unhappily inherited the culture without the money. Anxious to employ the best artists, he had had Raphael badgered in Rome; at Venice he had employed Bellini. Alfonso never learned that artists will not hurry, but when he came to patronize Titian he was offered enough opportunities to learn the lesson. Raphael had barred his studio to Alfonso's agents; Titian admitted them—but ignored them.

Ferrara is a small city not far from Venice and it was then very much under Venetian influence. Nevertheless Titian disliked going there and complained that it was too far away from models and all the things he needed for painting. He was entertained there first in February 1516. He lodged in the Castello, a gloomy crenellated fortress in the centre of the city, still to-day moated with green water.

We even know what he ate on this trip, for he received weekly rations of salad, salt meat, chestnuts, oranges, cheese and wine.

In the Castello Alfonso had a study which he wanted to decorate with large pictures. The first of these Bacchanalian scenes—this was the subject he chose—had been painted by Bellini. Titian either finished or repaired this picture. Then he himself began three pictures for Alfonso: two Bacchanals now in the Prado at Madrid, and the *Bacchus and Ariadne* of the National Gallery, London. As well as these he had to paint portraits of the Duke and of his mistress, and some religious pictures. Alfonso, in fact, was eager to have almost anything by Titian. At Ferrara, on one of his visits, Titian painted a portrait of the famous poet Ariosto. In return, perhaps, he got a mention in the second edition of the 'Orlando Furioso', a brief one: he was the 'honour of Cadore', the poet wrote. In view of Cadore's obscurity the compliment is not too well turned, nor is it very likely that poet and painter had much in common. Although often entertained at Ferrara, Titian, unlike Ariosto, was never on very intimate terms with the Duke or the court.

The Duke's agent in Venice was a certain Tebaldi, whose tasks included going to Titian and modifying or exaggerating the latest report of the Duke's temper. Short, irascible and eager, Alfonso was nearly driven mad by the delays of Raphael in Rome and Titian in Venice. It was probably Raphael's reluctance that prompted him to turn to Titian to

paint the Bacchanals. If he thought this would be a commission speedily executed he was, more speedily, disillusioned. By 1519 he was writing to his agent ordering him to remind Titian that he (the painter) was 'doing an ill turn to one who can resent it'.

Titian's reaction is not recorded. He was busier than ever at this time. The year before he had finished his vast canvas of the *Assumption* for the Church of the Frari at Venice: the most splendid and theatrical religious picture he had yet produced. It was shown to the public in March, and enthusiasm allayed the fears of the friars who commissioned it; among other things, the huge Apostles in the foreground had alarmed them. Once seen in position in the large church the scale of the figures increased the picture's effectiveness. It was perhaps this success of Titian's which reminded the Senate that his work for them was no nearer completion. In July he was summoned and threatened with having to pay the bill for another painter to do the work unless he went ahead immediately himself.

Still he did not hurry. Not only had he the Duke of Ferrara's commissions, with their attendant threats, but the cities of both Ancona and Brescia ordered large altarpieces about this time. Then an old friend of Titian's, the Bishop of Paphos, had asked for a large altarpiece of himself and members of his family, the Pesaro, for their chapel in the Frari. While all these were anxious for their pictures to be delivered, no one exceeded the Duke of Ferrara in determination. Two Bacchanals had arrived at Fer-

rara; the third, the *Bacchus and Ariadne*, was only the more keenly awaited. By 1520, when it had still not arrived, Alfonso was writing letters which passed from anger into near despair. He no longer threatened; he begged. Near Christmas he sent Titian a present of money, exhorting him to work *hard*.

An added complication arose in 1521 when the old Doge died and Titian was called on to paint his successor. A number of State portraits were required and probably the duplication was done in the studio by assistants. But it was part of Titian's duty as holder of his patent to paint the Doge and no doubt this provided an excuse for further delay regarding the pictures for Ferrara.

Alfonso attempted more insinuating tactics at the end of that year, asking Titian to come for Christmas—meaning him to bring the *Bacchus* with him. Titian excused himself and the Duke wrote to propose a trip together to Rome in the New Year. Again Titian managed to decline. In fact he went off to Brescia for Christmas. By June he was saying that he was not happy about parts of the *Bacchus*. In August Tebaldi stormed into the studio and Titian thought the picture would really be ready in a fortnight. They agreed that picture and painter would travel to Ferrara in October. In the meantime Titian swore to accept no more commissions—not even, he said, from God Almighty.

The winter came. A further threat from the Senate had also come in the shape of a special messenger.

He handed to Titian the Senate's last word: to finish his picture for the Doges' Palace by the next June or lose his broker's patent. (This time Titian took up the work, but not until well after the deadline of June had passed by.) He was now giving an appearance of working—at last—on the *Bacchus and Ariadne*; in December 1522 he said he would be able to go to Ferrara quite soon. And in January 1523 the marvellous news was sent to Alfonso that Titian and the picture really had left Venice. A porter carried the picture from the small landing-stage at Ferrara to the city on 30 January, and is noted as paid for his pains. Titian meantime had stopped to visit Mantua on his way. It was not until early February that he entered Ferrara; there he finished the last picture for the Duke's study.

His stay at Mantua gave him a new patron, Alfonso's nephew Federico Gonzaga. When Titian left to go on to Ferrara he brought Alfonso a letter from his nephew, begging that Titian might be allowed to work for him. In sheer relief, perhaps, at having finally got the *Bacchus*, Alfonso agreed.

At Venice, soon after Titian returned, the Doge died. In May Andrea Gritti was elected Doge and once again Titian had his duty of painting the new ruler's portrait. Under Gritti Titian was employed on a number of commissions; among them a fresco of St. Christopher in the Doges' Palace, and some decorations for the Doge's private chapel. Part of Gritti's reward for these was to advance members of Titian's family: his brother-in-law got a post at

Feltre, and his father became Inspector of the Mines in Cadore.

Prosperity increased for Titian. As well as working hard on the many commissions which Federico Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, was now giving him, and on the Doge's pictures, Titian produced the Pesaro altarpiece for the Bishop of Paphos in 1526; this was soon followed by other large altarpieces for Venetian churches. His studio must by this time have resembled a factory; and the output was continuous. When he fell ill of a fever one spring there was no time for convalescence until the autumn. When he went, at last, to Ferrara for Christmas, it was with the stipulation that he must be back at work in Venice by early January.

This activity did not mean that he led no social or home life. He married in 1525 and his wife, Cecilia, bore him three children: Pomponio, Orazio and Lavinia. And in 1527 there arrived in Venice Pietro Aretino, a poet, propagandist and journalist; he very soon became a close friend of Titian's, and a useful one. The malice of Aretino was already a by-word in Italy. It was said he had a bad word for everyone—except God, and that only because he did not know Him. Aretino's malevolence, which he poured abroad with his pen, was his power; most of the princes of Italy were afraid of his witty slanders and were willing to pay him well to avoid an unpleasant experience. Even the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, was glad to be able to have Aretino on his side; a result achieved by paying money.

But for Titian Aretino used his brilliant journalistic powers to give him publicity; he wrote to princes recommending the painter and sent out sonnets to herald the completion of each new picture. Titian repaid him by painting his portrait a number of times. He was also fond enough of Aretino to compare him to St. Paul, though the comparison hardly does justice either to his friend or to the saint. It is also likely that Aretino gave Titian some lessons in how to write letters—perhaps even wrote them for him. More and more Titian was moving in a world of great patrons, men rich but often forgetful. It was necessary at times to remind them courteously that they had not paid for the pictures they had ordered. It was an art at which Aretino excelled: his flattery was as polished as his satire was savage, and he reserved his most sugared compliments for those who paid well.

The friendship between the two men was partly a matter of temperament. Both enjoyed high jinks and low company; both had a strong appetite for every aspect of life; both believed in the greatness of Titian's art. We know they often dined together; and with their mutual friend, the architect Sansovino, they were nicknamed the 'Triumvirate'; for some twenty-five years the friendship lasted between all three, and then it was broken only through Aretino's death. When Michelangelo visited Venice in the autumn of 1529 it was perhaps through Aretino that he met Titian whose pictures he already admired.

That autumn there were other distinguished

travellers in Northern Italy. The Pope came from Rome to Bologna and the Emperor Charles V met him there, having come from Spain. It was at Bologna that Charles was to be crowned and the city had been chosen as rendezvous between him and Pope Clement VII for a meeting that should decide the future of Italy. The result was a bloodless conquest of Italy by the Emperor. The Italian princes hastened to pay homage to him and among them was Titian's patron, the Marquis of Mantua.

The Marquis soon found a way to give some romantic aid and introduce Titian into the Emperor's circle. At the end of March 1530, the Bologna conference closed. The Emperor and the Pope rode away in different directions. While in the city the Emperor had often been entertained at the house of a Count whose wife had a maid, Cornelia; there the Emperor's chief secretary saw and fell in love with her. It occurred to the Marquis of Mantua that it would be charming, and useful, if he got Titian to paint Cornelia's portrait and gave this to the very powerful secretary. He also decided to have a sculptor carve her bust.

Titian arrived at Bologna, only to meet the sculptor on the threshold of the house. The sculptor withdrew, angry at having a rival artist engaged on the same task. However Cornelia was no longer at Bologna. She had been sent to the country for a change of air and Titian had arrived too late. It was a very hot summer; Titian himself was feeling rather ill, and all



he could suggest was that he would paint Cornelia's portrait from a picture already in existence.

He went back to Venice. The portrait was hardly begun when his wife died. The Marquis of Mantua's agent reported to his master how distressed Titian was; he had been unable to work on Cornelia's portrait owing to this and to his own ill health. His melancholy continued but he managed to finish the picture by September. He had asked his sister Orsa to come down from Cadore to live with him and take care of his children. Their future was much in his mind and he was already making plans for his eldest son to enter the Church. Orsa came to Venice and Titian took a new and grander house in a more attractive quarter of the city; here he had a garden which was much praised for its beauty and which was later the scene of many supper parties of the 'Triumvirate'.

Meanwhile *Cornelia* went off to satisfy her Spanish admirer. The Marquis of Mantua followed the gift by more Titians, destined for more Spanish courtiers.

It was inevitable that the painter and the Emperor himself should finally meet. Charles returned to Italy in the autumn of 1532 and once again planned to meet the Pope at Bologna. His re-appearance in Italy had made everyone compete for his favour and for that of his retinue. Pictures were among the things Charles treasured most. Titian's Marquis at Mantua now managed to have the honour of entertaining the Emperor; as soon as he could Charles toured the huge palace and discovered Titian's portrait of the

Marquis. It was from that hand that he wished for a portrait of himself.

The words were probably hardly uttered before the Marquis sent a brief note to Titian saying, 'Come as quick as you are able.' This he supplemented by another equally brief letter, on the same day, saying, 'I expect you shortly.'

For some reason Titian did not go to Mantua. Instead he went to Bologna and there the Emperor arrived. It was probably early in 1533 that the Emperor sat for his first portrait, a full-length one now in the Prado at Madrid. There he stands stiff, dignified and melancholy. He knew he was an ugly man; painters, he said, made him a good deal uglier than he was and when people saw him they were agreeably disappointed.

As well as sitting to Titian, the Emperor discussed with him how to acquire some pictures which belonged to Alfonso of Ferrara but which Charles coveted. Like the rest of the Italian princes Alfonso had much to gain, and more to lose, in his behaviour to the Emperor; although what happened to his treasures is not known, he probably had to yield them gracefully. Titian seems to have joined in the diplomatic black-mail of this old patron without scruple.

When Charles got back to Spain in 1533 he rewarded Titian in a splendidly public manner for the Bologna portrait—probably portraits, for Titian copied his own original design. The Emperor issued a patent declaring that he would sit to no other painter—Alexander the Great having sat to none but

Apelles. Then the honours rain upon Titian; he is created Count of the Lateran Palace; Count of the Aulic Council; Count of the Consistory; he is to hold the title of Count Palatine. He may appoint justices; he may legitimize bastards—providing they are the offspring of persons below the rank of Baron. He is made a Knight of the Golden Spur, permitted to wear the sword, the chain and the golden spur. And, says Titian's earliest biographer, enviously, he got a thousand coins in gold each time he painted the Emperor.

Even for Titian here was incentive enough. For the rest of his life the Spanish court patronized him; but they had no monopoly of his services and Titian did not consider himself bound to them alone. Quite soon he was painting the Emperor's rival, François I, King of France, whom he had never seen. The portrait, now in the Louvre, Paris, shows the King in profile and probably Titian copied it from a medal. However, nothing of realism has been lost. François appears as sly and greedy as he was: Titian does not flatter him any more than he had flattered the Emperor. The Emperor and the King were two very different personalities and they may stand as representative of two national characters in their portraits by Titian. Charles, who was in fact only half Spanish by birth, is aloof, dignified, stiff, a typical Spanish grandee; François is more volatile, voracious, with all the *amour-propre* of a Frenchman who is good at making money and love.

Besides the French King, other patrons were

always pressing Titian for pictures. The new studio at Venice was full of Magdalens and Venuses in various stages of completion, most no doubt already earmarked for their destinations. Titian liked to work long at a picture, then leave it for a time and return for another spell later; the process occupied years in many cases and he was careful never to let a picture go until he—not the buyer—was satisfied.

While he was now at a peak of fame, and new patrons were coming with requests, his old patron Alfonso d'Este died. A few days before, the Pope also died. Titian's earliest work to gain fame outside Venice was that done for Alfonso, who had helped his career as well as exhausting him with threats. The death of the Pope and election of a member of the Farnese family, Paul III, prepared the way for fresh patronage, this time in Papal circles at Rome.

Famous though Titian was at Venice he was by no means the only good painter there, nor was he without rivals. His time was more and more being occupied by portraits. He was painting few religious pictures; nor had he as yet finished his Battle picture for the Doges' Palace.

The patience of the Senate, and Doge Gritti, his protector, was exhausted. A new artist had appeared in Venice, Pordenone. And when there arose the question of some paintings to be done in another hall of the Palace Pordenone was chosen.

A struggle was coming, similar to the one that Titian had had with Bellini. Pordenone was publicly commended for his speed of work—a hit at Titian.

Then the Council ordered Titian to refund all the money he had had through his broker's patent, since he had not fulfilled his promise. Nearly a year later they asked Pordenone to work in the Hall of Grand Council, on a space next to that reserved for Titian's painting.

These threats were the first that really frightened Titian. It was more than twenty years since he had achieved his broker's patent and the idea of refunding twenty years' salary would be particularly hateful to him. He therefore painted the picture of the Battle as quickly as he could. The battle chosen was that of Cadore when the Venetians defeated the Imperial army, some years before Charles V ascended the throne. The subject was not very tactful all the same. But Titian does not seem to have been disturbed by the fact that he was a pensioner of the Imperial court; his picture was a fine display of patriotism and Aretino praised it highly.

Titian was still unpopular with the Senate; he was short of money; the money owed him by the Emperor had not been paid and he was reduced to pleading with the Imperial agents. He seems to have longed to be out of Venice, for once in his life. Ironically, there was suddenly no demand from outside. Aretino wrote to Rome complaining that the Pope had not yet sent for Titian, who could add such lustre to the house of Farnese. Nothing happened.

Actually Aretino was also in trouble. The lampooner of all Italy was being lampooned. Five hundred couplets of abuse were devoted to him by

one poet—a poet whom Aretino had lodged and helped. Other satirists fell on him as mercilessly as he on them; they made a tactical mistake, however, by circulating their poetic abuse in manuscript. Aretino saw his opportunity. His replies were printed; they reached a wider audience, and the master triumphed.

Titian's circumstances also improved. A fortunate death, from his viewpoint, was Pordenone's in 1538. The next year he recovered his broker's patent; this he held until death. Then the Marques del Vasto, a soldier of the Emperor's, arrived in Venice for the installation of a new Doge, Pietro Lando. Here was someone to whom Titian could complain about his money worries and del Vasto promised to lend his help in extracting payment from the agents. The promise was worth all the more in so far as del Vasto had commissioned a picture from Titian and would be anxious to have it. The usual history took place: Aretino was soon writing to explain to the Marques that his picture was nearly ready, was almost finished—meanwhile it had hardly been started. But del Vasto got it in the end.

The proposed visit to Rome had not taken place since the Farnese had not invited Titian. There now arrived in Venice a member of the family and he sat to the painter. Ranuccio was the young grandson of the Pope, Paul III. Although only eleven he had attended a classics course at Padua and already had ecclesiastical status. His advisers were delighted by his portrait. An invitation was given to Titian that

he should visit Rome. Ranuccio's eldest brother, Cardinal Alessandro, was particularly the favourite of the Pope and it was he who was especially anxious to enlist Titian's services.

Among the tempting offers made to Titian, on the understanding he would go to Rome, was that his son Pomponio, the priest, would get a rich benefice. Pomponio's own inclinations were far from unworldly; his life was largely spent in causing scandal and bad example. After Titian's death he sold all he could, but this lasted him too short a time and he expired in poverty. Titian's other son, Orazio, seems to have been more satisfactory. Like his father he combined a flair for business with painting, though he was merely an assistant to Titian in producing pictures.

When in 1545 Titian set out for Rome, Orazio went with him. Many friends awaited the painter. He had previously met and painted Cardinal Alessandro and the Pope at Bologna; and the artist deputed to show him about Rome was Giorgio Vasari who had visited him once in Venice. Vasari was already collecting material for his book of biographies of other artists. When he came to write Titian's life he did not have to rely upon hearsay but upon his own knowledge.

Rome made a profound impression upon Titian. His visit was a success from the first; he was suitably lodged in splendour under the instructions of Cardinal Farnese who kept a splendid court. The Pope himself was old, still ambitious, a tall magni-

ficent and frightening figure, violent in his affections and his hatreds. At Bologna Titian had probably painted a three-quarter length of him which is now in the Museum at Naples: his head is sunk a little on the stiff velvet of his crimson cape, but his face looks out warily and the eyes narrow in penetrating scrutiny of the spectator.

The Papal court at Rome was a scene of intrigues and jealousies, most of them hidden from the Pope pre-occupied by his own intrigues with the Emperor. The Farnese family were not as united as they seemed, nor were the members very grateful for the advancement they had gained under the head of the Church and the head of their house. Titian served them all with pictures, and not only portraits. In his leisure hours Vasari guided him about Rome; Titian saw and duly admired. He wished he had come to Rome twenty years earlier. The artists in Rome were relieved that he had not and afraid that he might stay to take some commission from them. Michelangelo, however, had no cause for fear. He came to visit Titian in the latter's temporary studio and politely admired the canvases there, though he was not in fact very sympathetic to Venetian art.

At Rome the Pope again sat to Titian. In this picture he appears with two of his grandsons: Cardinal Farnese and Ottavio, a layman. Paul III had aged since his portrait had been taken at Bologna; here he turns petulantly at the obsequious entrance of Ottavio who is almost doubled in two by his deep bow, while at the left Cardinal Farnese gazes out



stonily, impassively, a discreet phantom at the Papal elbow. The picture is hardly more than a sketch and for some reason it was left unfinished. The aspect of these three people is an anticipation of history: Paul's two grandsons conspired against him and the fury and shock he underwent brought about his sudden death three years after Titian left Rome.

Before he left Titian was elected a Roman citizen. As well as this honour he took home with him promises of a benefice for Pomponio. His reception in Rome had seriously tempted him to enter the service of the Farnese family; perhaps even to quit Venice permanently for Rome. A post was offered to him at the Vatican Mint, just become vacant on the death of Sebastiano Luciani.

But another patron summoned him: the Emperor. Charles had recently won the battle of Mühlberg and was master of Germany. From Augsburg he wrote to Titian to come and paint his portrait; the news was received with excitement at Venice and Titian's studio was besieged by crowds who demanded any picture, however small, from his hand.

Titian was more than half committed to go to Rome. It was a choice between Pope and Emperor—both already engaged in a quarrel. Finally he wrote a pacifying letter to Cardinal Farnese, explaining that he could not refuse the Emperor, and early in 1547 he set off for Augsburg.

It was winter; Titian was an old man, and the journey long. When he arrived the ardours of the journey were forgotten in the warmth of Charles'

reception. The city was full of the Imperial family and was the scene of many processions and ceremonies emphasizing the Emperor's recent victory. To celebrate that day at Mühlberg Titian painted an equestrian portrait of Charles, now in the Prado, Madrid. The Emperor gallops forward, his lance at the ready, a figure determined rather than warlike. By nature he was not brave—he confessed to a fear of mice and spiders—and his constitution was weak. Titian caught him in a more intimate moment in another full length portrait, now at Munich. In this he sits, all in black, grave, shrewd but exhausted, very much the Emperor his contemporaries knew. After the Emperor, Titian painted some other members of the Imperial court and he remained at Augsburg for nearly a year. His arrival back in Venice was the occasion for feasts given by Aretino and his friends.

It was not long, however, before the Emperor was once more at Augsburg. Once more he summoned Titian and seems to have welcomed the artist cheerfully despite his prevailing gloom. The idea of his abdication had occurred to Charles and he wished for pictures by Titian to console him in the holy retreat he intended to seek; he also wanted a portrait of his son and successor, Philip II. The prince had no physical advantages and a displeasingly arrogant manner. Titian concealed neither fact; but his picture of Philip in armour (now in the Prado, Madrid) was sufficiently impressive to delight Mary Tudor, to whom it was sent in the hope of her marriage to the

prince. The picture was probably the first Titian to come to England; its effect on M<sup>ary</sup> was all that had been hoped, and she made the unpopular and unhappy marriage.

When the sittings were over Philip took leave of his father and returned to Spain. A short while after Charles moved to Innsbruck, probably taking Titian with him. Then they too parted. Titian went back to Venice and he never saw either the Emperor or Philip again.

His work for them continued. Philip now rivalled his father in the demands he made upon Titian; his palace at Madrid was like an eternal void which Titian could never sufficiently fill with pictures. Philip wrote for more and the letters crossed with those of Titian complaining that he was not getting paid. Charles wanted chiefly religious pictures, above all a 'Trinity' which he took, at his abdication, into his Spanish solitude. There it was when, in 1558, he died.

The peculiar temper of Philip was religious and sensual, both to excess. On the death of his father, he became Titian's greatest patron and the old painter set about satisfying the dual appetite: for mythological pictures, full of nymphs bathing and men hunting; and for pious weeping Magdalens and flagellated Christs.

Old as he was, Titian did not fail in supplying these. After a middle age devoted almost entirely to portraiture he went back to subjects of his youth. The vigour he had always possessed did not desert him,

nor did his strength. Once again a Doge died and a new one was elected; Titian's position was such that he was no longer required to paint these election portraits, although he kept his patent. He married off his daughter, Lavinia, in 1555 and the next year his increasing isolation was emphasized by the death of Aretino.

He was left with more time for work. His younger son Orazio conveniently journeyed for him, when necessary, to collect a pension or remind a patron of money owing. Orazio was also a help when, in 1559, Titian's elder brother died at Cadore.

When Titian was not painting he was writing to Philip II describing his latest pictures and their progress or their despatch. In time his letters took on an air of the ritual Spanish court; they are contorted into elaborate expressions of gratitude and professions of loyalty, memories of the majesty of Charles V, and pleas for more money. When the letters reached Madrid Philip endorsed them with marginal notes of brevity: 'send the money', or 'as to matters here, I don't know how they stand'. These laconic phrases were expanded into replies, often requests to the Treasury to pay Titian the sum demanded.

The court of Spain was gradually sinking into a confusion of ceremonial idleness with the King a victim of the mesh of servants about him. Titian held back pictures as an inducement to make Philip pay, as the Spanish agent at Venice knew. To the minister, Perez, at Madrid, he complained of Titian's avarice;

but he also begged that some money should be sent if Titian were to proceed.

Pictures for Venetian churches were still produced by Titian. He even travelled to Brescia to undertake work there. When, in 1566, Vasari came to Venice to see him he was enjoying 'health and happiness unequalled'. And his brush was still in his hand. We have an idea of how he seemed about that time in a self portrait now in the Prado at Madrid: sober, quietly confident, and the paintbrush ready for fresh work.

Besides his activity as a painter Titian now found time to become involved with antique dealers; his name and his prestige were useful in disposing of *objets d'art*. Although he had begun to hand over some of his pensions to Orazio—as if in preparation for death—he started again a correspondence with his old patron, Cardinal Farnese. Then he sent a picture as a present to the Pope, Pius V. Still he was anxious to have favours given to Pomponio, and Cardinal Farnese again promised his help.

A royal visitor to Titian's studio was Henry III of France, who was on his way to Paris to ascend the throne he had just inherited. He was still in mourning for the death of his brother and appeared at Venice in a costume of purple velvet. Splendid ceremonies were arranged at his reception and Henry spared time to visit the aged but active painter.

Titian was then about ninety-seven. 'An old servant', he called himself when on Christmas Day 1575 he wrote to Philip of Spain. There was ill

fortune in the world in which they now lived; he was in his 'last age' but he prayed God long to spare the King's life. Again in February of the following year he wrote, reminding the King of all those years since Charles V had knighted him, and for the last time he begged for money.

Venice was at peace politically, but threatened by plague. It had returned in 1575 when a hot summer had increased its violence. Nor did it disappear with the winter. In 1576 it flared up again, an outbreak more terrible than that of Titian's youth which had killed Giorgione. Hospitals were established and every attempt made to check its spread; nothing could combat it. It raged throughout the summer and at its height Titian died.

He had made a bargain with the friars of the Frari church that he should have a grave site in exchange for a picture he would paint them. He chose as subject a Pietà of Christ mourned by His mother, with Joseph of Arimathea and Mary Magdalen. The picture had remained unfinished, Titian and the friars having quarrelled. His pupil, Palma the Younger, took the picture, worked on it and inscribed it thus: what Titian left unfinished Palma reverently finished, and he dedicated the work to God.

Titian had intended finally to be buried at Cadore. The State chose that he should be buried in the Frari; a grand funeral was planned, but this did not take place owing to the plague. The friars received Titian's corpse, but not the Pietà. It hung for long in

another church and then was taken to its present site, in the gallery of the Academy at Venice.

Titian's life was a success story; he achieved great fame and great wealth and was given many years in which to enjoy them. This alone would mark him off from most artists; the great artist is more usually in opposition to the world and he pays the penalty of his greatness in a life of misery. Van Gogh's is such a life. The lives of Michelangelo and Rembrandt show the torture that an artist can undergo even while patronized by his contemporaries.

Titian underwent no tortures, unless in his exertions to obtain money. Apart from financial demands his life is almost devoid of incident. His personality is faint to us not because he lived so long ago—for Michelangelo was his contemporary and is vivid enough—but because his personality was sucked up in his genius as a painter. That was his nature, though he was not devoid of feelings for his family and friends. He was not, we may suppose, very subtle, or sensitive, or learned. His appetite for life was too greedy to permit these qualities.

From the first his attitude was coarser than Giorgione's in dealing with the same romantic subjects. He painted not what he dreamed but what he saw in front of him. This is one reason why he was a success in his lifetime: the humanity of the people in his pictures was so strong that it made everything else about the pictures unimportant; the clothes they wore had the texture of real clothes and

their faces were recognizable as the faces of real people.

This ability to grasp the reality of people helped Titian to be a great portrait painter. What he saw he put down on the canvas, never swerving from that vision to flatter. He did not, like earlier painters, make a portrait merely the picture of a face. He extended the canvas to include the sitters' hands, something of their clothes; sometimes he paints them with a personal object, a statuette, a favourite dog, even a pair of gloves. To achieve a striking effect of reality he would paint a full length portrait nearly life size: some of the state portraits for Charles V and Philip II are like this.

But Titian's grasp of reality, which extended beyond people to trees, and grass, and the sky, was conveyed the more vividly because of his use of oilpaint. When he was young the medium of oil was a novelty. Bellini used it, but he inclined to use it as if it were the old medium of tempera—watercolour mixed with egg. So it is partly fresh vision which pushed Titian on to experiment with the effects obtainable in oilpaint, and partly the medium which encouraged the experiment.

The difference between old and new is shown if we compare two pictures, both in the National Gallery in London. Bellini's *Doge Loredano* is a head and shoulders portrait of the old Doge set stiffly against a flat blue-green background. The face is carefully drawn in with incisive lines marking each detail of the wrinkled features; the paint is applied so smoothly



that there is no trace of brushstroke and the effect is like a softly glowing enamel. The head and shoulders are bathed in a steady light and the shadows are sufficient to shape the folds of embroidered robe without obscuring the robe's pattern. The closer one peers the more detail is apparent: each eyelash has been delicately painted in. The effect is impressive but remote, the face less that of a living person than of a mummy.

Titian's *Portrait of a Man* is not of a ruler and some absence of constraint is to be expected. His picture, done probably ten years or so after Bellini's, is of a youngish darkhaired man who turns towards us as he leans one arm along a balustrade which cuts off the picture along the bottom. His arm and shoulder, clad in a swollen sleeve of quilted blue-grey silk, project so prominently that they almost distract attention from his face. The rest of the picture is dark, except for the few pleats of white shirt at the man's neck and a thin thread of gold chain looped over this. But the sleeve, shirt, and the sitter's face, emerge from the shadows of the background caught by a much less steady light than Bellini's Doge. The darkness in Titian's portrait is not flat but atmospheric; it is a gloom into which we peer as if following the shape of something in a mist.

To look more closely at the picture is to make the illusion vanish. The sweep of quilted sleeve, so apparently resting there that it has the creases of silk and watery ripples of light, passes into being some blue brush strokes on a grey-blue ground—applied,

it seems, at random. The shirt is a few rapid flicks of white paint, the gold chain an even more rapid trail of yellow paint left by a thin-pointed brush; the shadows of the background are a vaguely brushed-in mixture of blue and black.

This freedom was what Titian discovered.

After Titian oil painting could never again be the rather timid medium it had been in his youth. There was no longer any need to draw all the outlines in a picture carefully; objects were seen impressionistically—no line, for instance, marks where Titian's man in blue begins to pass into the background. Titian omitted the lines because they are not there in nature and as he grew older he let the paint have such liberty that everything in these late pictures is slightly blurred. The shapes melt away into being just patches of colour, applied lightly and rubbed into each other so that each partakes of the tone of the next; and in the end there is hardly present any colour, as such, to which we can give a name. Black, white, and red—he is recorded as saying—are sufficient for any painter. After the opulent colouring of his early pictures, Titian began to restrict himself to these three colours and to make harmonies out of the intermingling of them.

More than the subjects of his pictures, it was his treatment of paint that attracted those who came after. As painter he was a master for Rubens, for Velazquez, even for Rembrandt (who yet may never have seen a Titian—only engravings of the pictures). And his followers in Venice were many; nobody could

avoid his influence and his two great, but younger, contemporaries, Tintoretto and Veronese, recognized their debt to him.

To us he has taken on an added lustre. He is a symbol of the Venetian republic which has passed away; because he painted so many European personalities he symbolizes also part of the Western world of his day. Many people are remembered now because he painted them and the characters of Charles V, Philip II, Pope Paul III—among others—are the more vivid since they found an hour or two out of their busy lives to sit for Titian.

He belonged intensely to his period and his city. The religious aspect of that time is seen in his grandiloquent canvases full of healthy cherubs and good-looking saints; and so is the cheerful paganism in his profane pictures of healthy cupids and good-looking goddesses. Men and women were the subject of a new and powerful interest: Titian has echoed the interest in his vast gallery of men and women, ordinary people as well as the great.

The end of Titian's life was full of change. The gusto of the Renaissance was exhausted: things were never again to be so frank and easy. Titian was born into a world which might, perhaps for the last time, be surveyed by one man's gaze. He gazed, and what he saw is painted upon the many canvases he produced.

### III

## *RUBENS*

BELGIUM is a flat country, geographically speaking, and flat in some other ways too. Its history is confused and often uninteresting, overshadowed by the proud annals of its neighbour Holland. But it has at least to its cultural credit that it produced Rubens, a patriot as well as a painter.

It was owing to upheavals in Belgium that Rubens was born not there but in Germany. Belgium and Holland then formed part of one kingdom, the Spanish Netherlands, which Spain tried to rule. While Rubens was still very young a group of provinces, calling themselves the United Provinces, broke away from this kingdom and later became Holland. The rest of the Spanish Netherlands, including the county of Flanders, remained, uneasily, a Spanish possession. While the United Provinces tended towards Protestantism the Spanish Netherlands were long to remain Catholic.

Rubens' father, Jan, was a citizen of Antwerp in Flanders, but he was suspected of Protestant leanings. He was a lawyer of good reputation and when he fled—in face of Spanish persecution—it was to Cologne where he soon became legal adviser to Princess Anna of Saxony. Jan Rubens had a wife, Maria; the Princess a husband, William the Silent.

But neither of these facts prevented Jan Rubens from becoming the Princess's lover; they retired together to the small town of Siegen, leaving Maria Rubens in Cologne. It was there she heard of the love affair, of its discovery, and of her husband's imprisonment. When at last, by her efforts, he was released it was only on condition that they settled down to live in Siegen.

There in 1577 Rubens was born, being christened Peter Paul for he was born on 28 June, the eve of the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. Older than Rubens by three years was his brother Philip, also born at Siegen; there was also a much older brother, Jean-Baptiste, a sister Blandine, and some other children who did not survive.

Rubens was about a year old when the family were allowed by the Prince to return to Cologne. Jan Rubens seems to have been broken by his disgrace and imprisonment; the return to Cologne only emphasized the family's unhappy situation, for business connections had fallen away and such money as the family had was swallowed up by bail for Jan Rubens' release. In Cologne Jan Rubens died. His wife erected a tombstone to his memory recording a married life of perfect felicity, arranged that no mention should be made of the episode at Siegen, and returned to Antwerp.

Here Rubens, who was now ten years old, went to school next door to the Cathedral; he learnt Latin and Greek, and love of the Classics remained with him—his letters throughout his life bristle with Latin tags. It is a poor compliment to say he is among

the best educated of painters, but he is. Habits of scholarship ran in the family and his brother Philip was to become one of Antwerp's learned men, before his premature death in 1611.

In 1590 Rubens' sister Blandine was married. Her mother provided her with a yearly allowance and this perhaps necessitated the move which took place to a smaller house. Philip went off to Brussels to enter the service of a politician and Rubens left school for his first taste of court society. His mother was a devout Catholic, as Rubens himself remained; he was now sent as page to the Catholic and aristocratic household of the Comtesse de Lalaing at Oudenaarde, some way south of Antwerp.

He remained there only a few months. The Comtesse kept her small court rigidly ruled with an etiquette almost Spanish and Rubens probably had never wished to go there; he wished to be a painter and soon he was back at Antwerp. He entered the studio of a certain Tobias Verhaecht who had, fortunately for his reputation, married into the Rubens family; this obscure person became Rubens' first master.

Antwerp had been a city of artistic activity. Like the rest of Northern Europe it had been allured by Italy and the splendours of the Italian Renaissance; a prosperous trading centre, it could indulge in patronage of the arts and humanities. Just before Rubens was born the city had suffered severely in the Spanish wars and was, at the time he returned from Oudenaarde, still trying to recover its prosperity.

To discover himself Rubens had to leave Flanders.

Few would find it hard to exchange Belgium for Italy, and Rubens had probably long been anxious to make the change. After Verhaecht he studied under Van Noordt who had a large studio, was in his day a popular painter, and has left us happily few works. And finally at Antwerp Rubens worked under Otto Van Veen, painter to the Court of Spain but, more relevantly, someone who knew Italy well and had practised in Rome. Veen, whose name was often latinized into Vaenius, is interesting as a prototype of Rubens: a cultured man, a connoisseur—though hardly an important painter. Veen pointed the way south. On 9 May 1600 Rubens left Antwerp for Italy.

He chose Venice as his first city. The Flemish, in their busy absorption of other Italian influences, had hardly noticed Venice. Rubens arrived; he saw Titian's paintings, those of Tintoretto and Veronese, and the Southern opulence and colour were straight away an inspiration and a challenge. But he did not stay long at Venice. The Duke of Mantua, Vincenzo Gonzaga, was one of the dwindling remainder of petty Renaissance-style rulers in Italy. Happening to be in Venice he met and engaged Rubens as one of his court painters.

Mantua is small, isolated among its mosquito-ridden marshes. But it had already been visited by a number of great painters and the Gonzaga collection was famous and fine. The building which housed this was equally splendid, a vast rambling series of palaces built at different times and joined to each other. Rubens had entered the Duke's service by the

autumn of 1600, for he travelled in October with the Duke to Florence to witness the marriage by proxy of Marie de' Medici—sister of the Duke's wife—to Henri IV of France. In very different circumstances Rubens and Marie de' Medici were to meet again.

Meanwhile at Mantua Rubens had plenty of opportunities to study the great Italian painters of the Renaissance in pictures which a later Gonzaga was to sell to Charles I of England. He himself was probably employed in copying some of these, as well as painting a few portraits.

Since the Duke also enjoyed having pictures copied he decided in 1601 that Rubens should go to Rome for this purpose; nothing can have suited the painter better, for it was the single great city of Italy he had not yet visited. The Duke went off to concern himself in a war in Northern Europe. Rubens went south from Mantua and by August he was in Rome.

Then, as always, Rome did not have a school of native artists; it preferred to draw its artists from other cities and adopt them. When Rubens arrived it was full of Bolognese painters, attempting a calm and classic style, at war with a violent and ruthless realist painter, Caravaggio. Both parties placed great emphasis upon the three-dimensional and both seem to have made an appeal to Rubens. It happened that he received a commission from the Archduke Albert, governor of the Spanish Netherlands which were Rubens' home, for three pictures to decorate a Roman church. The Archduke did not know Rubens, but he had asked his ambassador in Rome to find a



painter who would execute the work; and the ambassador was son of the president of the Council to whom Philip Rubens had been secretary. Thus the commission came to Rubens.

By April 1602 all three pictures were finished and Rubens was back in Mantua. That summer his brother Philip was also travelling in Italy. The two met at Verona and probably went back together to Mantua. Rubens had now become an accepted part of the Duke's court there and, though still quite young, was soon to be entrusted with his first diplomatic mission.

The Spanish were interfering as busily in Italy as they had been during Titian's lifetime. Philip III was now king and his goodwill was necessary if Mantua was to survive as a duchy amid the larger powers who divided Italy. Spain itself was, as usual, suffering from inept government, the King having delegated much of his power to a group of avaricious favourites: these, also as usual, proved the best patrons of artists and the greatest connoisseurs.

Vincenzo Gonzaga planned some diplomatic bribery—in the shape of pictures, crystal vases, chandeliers and brocades—to be distributed suitably to the King and his favourites. Rubens was chosen to accompany the presents in March 1603. The choice was flattering. It gave Rubens an opportunity to show that his talents were not solely concerned with painting.

The journey to Spain was arduous and he had plenty of problems: about ships from Genoa, about money, about how to convey the baggage weighted

with the precious objects destined for the Spanish court. He found such details tiresome, as we know from the letters he sent back to Mantua while on the journey—but he managed to arrange everything very well. Then, on arrival in Spain, it rained steadily for twenty days. Rubens pushed on, through the rain, to reach the King's court at Valladolid. When he arrived it was to find that Philip III had left just before and would not return for two months. And when, in the interval, the baggage was unpacked some of the pictures had been rotted by the damp climate and needed restoring.

Rubens coped with this last difficulty in his usual practical way: he had the pictures restored, painting on some of them himself. A final factor of unease in Spain was caused by the Duke of Mantua's ambassador, none too pleased to find a young painter in charge of a diplomatic mission and petty enough to fail deliberately to present Rubens to the King when at last, in July, he arrived. This also Rubens accepted, though he was disappointed.

But the Spanish took an interest in him. When it came to presenting gifts to the prime minister, the Duke of Lerma, this nobleman showed his anxiety to use Rubens both as diplomat and as painter. It was as well that the Duke obtained some genuine paintings, for the pictures sent him from Mantua were only copies passing as original. The Duke ordered a portrait of himself, on horseback, as well as some half-lengths of Christ and the Apostles. These pictures have all survived and are in Madrid, the equestrian

portrait in a private collection and the remainder in the Prado gallery.

Proposals were made that Rubens should stay in Spain, but even if tempted he could hardly accept. By the end of the year or early in 1604, he was back at Mantua, proud of his successful management of the Spanish affair. The success seems to have been marked by an advance in his salary. We know only one or two pictures on which he was employed after his return. Among them was the *Gonzaga family adoring the Trinity*, a large picture of which the middle portion was later destroyed, probably by the French; it is one of the few Gonzaga pictures which has actually remained at Mantua.

Probably Philip Rubens came again on a visit there early in the winter of 1605. The two brothers travelled to Rome and lived together in the centre of the city. They even collaborated in some learned research on antiques: Philip working at the text and Rubens providing the illustrations. In fact Rubens not only copied antique sculpture; he began to buy it and started the collection which was later assembled in his house at Antwerp. But he was still the Duke of Mantua's painter, in token of which the Duke was meant to be paying his salary. By July 1606 Rubens was courteously drawing attention to the fact that the salary was not being paid.

No doubt it was paid, for by the end of the year the Duke suddenly ordered Rubens back to Mantua. Rubens wrote—or rather his brother Philip did, for the painter had been ill—to beg for three more

months in Rome. The Duke agreed quite pleasantly and Rubens did not leave, in the end, until June 1607.

The reason for his wanting to remain at Rome was that he had been commissioned to paint the high altar-piece in the newly built church of Santa Maria in Vallicella. Rubens had been chosen in preference to some famous native Italian painters. It is clear from what he writes himself, modestly, that he had found distinguished patrons in Rome, including the Pope's nephew Cardinal Borghese, and was anxious to justify their patronage. A disappointment about his own painting awaited him, but one that he overcame in his typically sensible manner.

When the summer came he could delay no longer at Rome and had to return to Northern Italy, to accompany the Duke of Mantua on a journey to Genoa. This duty done, Rubens returned to Rome to work on his picture for Santa Maria in Vallicella. When it was at last ready and placed in position it was greatly admired, but the tricky lighting of the church did not suit a picture painted on canvas (the effect being rather shiny). For his own reputation's sake Rubens decided to paint a fresh picture for the church, this time on stone, as it gave a matt surface. He offered the earlier one to his patron the Duke of Mantua. But the Mantuan treasury was already depleted by a family wedding, and the Duchess owed another painter in Rome money, and Rubens' offer was refused. Meanwhile he finished the more elaborate version of his first picture and this is still in the church.

Whether Rubens would have stayed on in Rome, or been obliged to return to Mantua, does not now matter. In October 1608 the news came that his mother was dying at Antwerp; pausing only to write a hasty explanatory and apologetic letter to the court at Mantua, he immediately set off for his home. He spoke of his speedy return to Italy and his anxiety to continue serving Vincenzo Gonzaga. When he mounted horse at Rome his mother was already dead. One way and another, he was never to return to Italy again.

More than twenty years later the Imperial troops sacked Mantua and the news reached Rubens where he still lived—at Antwerp. To him it was especially sad; he described how he remembered Italy with delight, and even his years of service with the house of Gonzaga had become a pleasant memory.

Yet when he was back in Antwerp at the end of 1608 he seems to have decided to settle down in his own country. And the Duke of Mantua does not seem to have pressed for his court painter's return. Nothing was more admirably timed than Rubens' arrival at Antwerp, for a truce had at last been agreed between Spain and the United Provinces (who were to become Holland); there followed a twelve year peace and in those twelve years Rubens became famous. Everything conspired to keep the artist at home: in 1609 his brother Philip became Secretary of Antwerp and later that year the Spanish Regents of the Netherlands, the Archduke Albert and his wife Isabella, appointed him their court painter. The court was at Brussels, but

for Rubens attendance was waived and he was permitted to reside at Antwerp. There he established himself.

The Rubens family had always been respected at Antwerp: they were good bourgeois like the rest and, in addition, the scholarly element among the citizens respected Philip Rubens for his learning. It was an essentially middle-class world in which Rubens was received at least as an equal; here he could be offered civic commissions for pictures in Antwerp churches and be welcomed—at the painters' banquet of 1609—as 'Signor Rubens' just back from Italy. A last tie to bind him to the city came on 8 October 1609 when he married Isabella Brant, whose father was one of the Antwerp worthies.

By 1611 the prosperity which it was Rubens' pleasing fate to enjoy so fully had come to him in generous degree. He could say then, without exaggeration, that he had had to refuse over one hundred applications to enter his studio and many of these came from friends of his own or his wife's. In fact by this time his studio had become a sort of factory, for he had long ago had demands for more work than even his energy could complete single-handed. In Antwerp the Jesuits were eager to adorn their churches and pictures were needed whose size and subject would stun a congregation into pious amazement. At this period Rubens was producing, aided by his pupils, vigorous and dramatic canvases of the New Testament: moments of emotional force—the Crucifixion, the Flagellation—that would domi-

nate the complicated architecture of the churches and send echoing along the high naves almost strident cries of man's brutality to the Son of Man.

At the same time his studio was humming with the effortless production of mythological pictures, while friends in Rome were buying him some antiquities. Rubens was perhaps the last great painter who shared, without self-consciousness, the Renaissance blend of sacred and profane. He came from an assured generation whose hearts were in Rome: a seventeenth-century city of the Popes, but also a ruin of antiquity and the capital of the Caesars.

That was perhaps what existed in Rubens' imagination. In the material world he lived at Antwerp and early in 1611 he had purchased a house and grounds there. To this he soon added; by the time he had finished his new buildings, gardens, statues and decorations, he had created almost a palace. It became one of the show places of Antwerp even during the painter's lifetime; those who visited it came away speechless at its luxury and wrote down their incoherent impressions in terms of suitable stupefaction.

Rubens' eldest son, Albert, was not born there in 1614, for the house seems not to have been ready (in fact Rubens was still making substantial alterations more than ten years later) but the family lived there from 1616 onwards. Older than Albert was a daughter Clara Serena who died a little before she was thirteen; and a younger son, Nicholas, was born in 1618. All three children were drawn and painted

by Rubens, and served also as models for the infant Christ, cupids, and children as they were needed in other pictures.

While Rubens was satisfying his fellow citizens in Antwerp he learnt of an English collection of those antiquities which he still assiduously collected, and so he came into contact with this country for the first time. The English ambassador to the United Provinces at The Hague was Sir Dudley Carleton; his collection of antiquities lured Rubens into an exchange of some of his own paintings for the collection. After some preliminary bargaining an arrangement was made and in May 1618 Rubens was working hard at the pictures Carleton had chosen from a list conveniently provided. Soon other Englishmen were interested in the painter and Carleton was commissioned by his friend Lord Danvers to have a picture painted that Danvers might present to the Prince of Wales (later Charles I). Then the English ambassador at Brussels asked for a picture and, as early as 1621, Rubens was offering his services to James I for decorating the Banqueting Hall at Whitehall: such a large commission, as he said himself, suited his talents better than small works. Although time elapsed, his willingness for that task was not forgotten.

London was becoming the city of one group of Rubens' patrons, but he now discovered another: Paris. In 1622 he went there for the first time, at the request of the Queen Mother, Marie de' Medici, whose marriage he had witnessed many years before



in Florence. The Queen Mother had conceived plans for glorifying herself and her late husband. Two large galleries were to be devoted to pictures of their exploits, and the sole difficulty for Rubens lay in the fact that while her husband had had an adventurous career the life of Marie de' Medici was totally devoid of interesting incident—except for her quarrels, perpetuation of which was not desirable. But the Queen Mother—a descendant of Lorenzo de' Medici, the Magnificent, who first patronized Michelangelo—recognized Rubens' talent and supported him amid the jealousies and even hatred which followed.

In the year before Rubens visited Paris the Twelve Years' Truce came to an end; it might perhaps have been renewed had not the Archduke Albert died and Philip III of Spain also. The Spanish Netherlands now came more directly under the new King, Philip IV, but he allowed his widowed aunt, the Infanta Isabella, to remain there as Governor. His policy was to force the United Provinces to submit, and soldiers and money for this battle would have to come from the Spanish Netherlands; in fact, Rubens' country would again be at war, not for any reason of its own but solely to extend the empire of Spain. Rubens' own passionate wish was for peace, as was the Infanta Isabella's. Already her court painter, he had now become also her trusted diplomatic agent—which was one reason why some powers in France distrusted him.

Rubens' entanglement in diplomacy is a complex matter (of which we still do not know all) partly because the affairs of Europe at the time were com-

plex. In fact nationalism was forcing its way up in each country, despite attempts to check it. Spain was a cumbrous and dying organism; opposing it was the proud and vital group of United Provinces that were to become Holland.

When Rubens went to Paris, an amateur diplomat on a mission as painter, he found there a professional diplomat, only that year raised to the scarlet, Cardinal Richelieu. Richelieu was plotting against Spain and quarrelling with the Queen Mother; soon he found cause to be suspicious of the Flemish painter she was patronizing. Rubens recognized the antagonism of Richelieu, to Spain and to himself.

But his first stay in Paris was not passed in an air of hostility. He made friends with French scholars and collectors, among whom one, Nicolas Pieresc, remained a lifelong friend; from Flanders to Paris and back passed a continual exchange of letters between them, learned, archæological, full of talk about drawings and gems and books. Once the correspondence threatened to stop when Rubens seemed engaged in diplomacy against France, but the moment passed and the letters sprang up again.

Rubens was back in Paris in 1625 for the placing of the series of pictures of Marie de' Medici's life in their gallery. By then he was in the thick of diplomatic and artistic activity; he said he was the busiest man in the world. Richelieu too had commissioned some work—the man who shared the rule of France with the Queen Mother, Rubens wrote in a letter from Paris to the Infanta Isabella. Nor were the suspicions

of Richelieu about him without some justification: for Rubens' letters to the Infanta show him occupied by proposals and intrigues, and they read like those of an ambassador sending back reports on conditions abroad. Rubens, to all intents, was a travelling ambassador—for his country and, by extension, for Spain. He even has a code when writing to some people; distinguished personages are referred to by numerals only—rather like the playing cards in 'Alice in Wonderland'—and the death of 11, and the intentions of 3 and 26 add an air of mystery to his diplomatic correspondence.

The marriage of the Princess Henrietta Maria to Charles I of England was being celebrated in Paris and Rubens now came into contact with the English nobleman closest to the throne: the Duke of Buckingham, who had the duty of escorting the bride back to England and Charles I. A portrait of the Duke was drawn and negotiations began for Rubens to sell his collection of antiquities to Buckingham. Buckingham also had aspirations as a statesman; these bore fruit in a series of disastrous incidents, of which the King's French Catholic marriage was only one. With Buckingham in Paris was his Master of the Horse, Balthasar Gerbier, of dubious character and antecedents, a painter and a bit of a politician. He and Rubens remained in contact by letter after each had returned to their separate cities, and politics as much as painting was the subject of discussion.

There was plague in Antwerp soon after Rubens' return from Paris and, either for this reason or by

coincidence, he was away travelling on the Infanta Isabella's business. In the autumn he was at Brussels and had heard that the plague was lessening. But it seems likely that there was another outbreak in 1626; at any rate, Rubens' wife died suddenly in June of that year. This blow he seems to have borne well, though expressly disclaiming any attempt at stoicism. He determined to try and forget, and to occupy himself with other things.

The Dutch were now busy fighting for their liberty, but Rubens as an onlooker was not sympathetic. He accepted the dominion of Spain, as he accepted God. The Infanta's court was small and sterile, ministers in office until they died; she herself was a childless widow, anxious for peace, kindly and pious. Rubens painted her often; after her husband's death she always wore the Franciscan habit of the Poor Clares and this is how she appears most often in Rubens' portraits. In a letter of this time Rubens recognizes the narrow quality of court life at Brussels, but his admiration for the Infanta herself was always strong.

In the autumn of 1626 he was ill for a while, but soon recovered. Exchange of letters with Gerbier in England had prompted him, perhaps on his own initiative, to see if some negotiation could establish peace in Europe. By now the Duke of Buckingham had involved England in war with Spain, while England also supported the United Provinces in their defiance of Philip IV. The position of Spain was precarious, although England had been the aggressor, since it was declining while France, under Richelieu,

rose. It was against such a background of events that Rubens opened negotiations with Gerbier; they met at Paris in early 1627 and each reported back—Gerbier to London and Rubens to Madrid. The Infanta Isabella was to represent Spain in armistice meetings, while Gerbier represented, of course, the Duke of Buckingham.

At first it seemed likely that Spain and England would easily make peace. Isabella and Rubens were pressing for a treaty and a truce, but Philip IV had already secretly made a pact with France. Placed in this difficult position, for the King hardly wished as yet to reveal the existence of this pact, he chose first to alter the issue and wrote complaining to his aunt that she permitted a mere painter, Rubens, to represent the monarchy of Spain. But she trusted Rubens and defended her choice.

Rubens kept his semi-official position and now made a visit to Holland, again to meet Gerbier. But the disadvantage of being not more than a negotiator for a side that had decided nothing was soon apparent. Gerbier complained that Rubens brought no definite proposals, nor could the unfortunate painter do so, for Philip IV was delaying as long as possible before revealing the Franco-Spanish alliance. In September 1627 Philip's envoy arrived at the Infanta's court, and news of this unexpected alliance was published, to the dismay of the Infanta and the despair of Rubens. Gerbier went back to England after his fruitless stay in Holland, blaming many people but recognizing that Rubens at least had been sincere.

But eventually Philip IV agreed to re-open negotiations with England. Rubens again came forward. By now the painter was skilled in affairs and had some name as a diplomatist. The more seriously Philip considered peace with England, the more he insisted that Madrid not Brussels must be the location of the Spanish side's discussion. Rubens was required to submit all the documents he had had from Gerbier, and the painter, in acquiescing, mentioned that they needed to be explained by some person, Rubens himself for example, if it pleased the sovereign. Philip signified that it would not, at least, displease him. In August 1628 Rubens left for Madrid.

A reason had been given out that he went to paint the King's portrait. It deceived no one, apparently, and his arrival in Spain fluttered a number of diplomatic dove-cotes. Rumour flew about. In the midst of it all the murder of the Duke of Buckingham occurred and there were further Spanish delays.

Rubens did not remain inactive. He had not stopped painting and the slowness of the diplomatic negotiations now offered him a welcome chance to devote more time to it. He did paint the King's portrait, as well as portraits of other members of the royal family. He admired, and copied, the Titians in the royal collection: those pictures which had occupied so much of Titian's last years. He met Philip IV's court painter, Velazquez, whose work he praised. The two men could hardly fail to accord in their homage to Italy, and to Venice especially, and, among Venetians,

to Titian who was a master for them both in the paintings he had left behind.

Rubens had been hoping that he could visit Italy again on his return from Madrid. But the news from England being favourable, Philip IV, now reconciled to the painter's unpainterly activities, decided to send him as envoy to England. He was thereupon given official status as Secretary of the Privy Council of the Netherlands and received from the King's hand a diamond-studded ring. Furnished with these he left Madrid on 29 April, 1629, passed through Paris and Brussels, crossed to Dover, and on 25 June met Charles I at Greenwich.

Although Charles thought the painter came as an ambassador empowered to conclude a treaty, Rubens was once more a mere negotiator on behalf of the sluggish and intricate Spanish court, itself hesitant in decision and jealous of initiative. He was anxious that Spain should send an ambassador to London, and that Charles should send one to Madrid. Each party agreed; each, however, waited for the other to send first and between the two dignified procrastinators Rubens suffered frustration.

While he suffered in the cause of international peace, he was not treated without honour. A visit to Cambridge in the autumn of 1629 resulted in an honorary M.A. Then the Spanish ambassador actually arrived. When, early in 1630, Rubens quitted London Charles I knighted him, presented him with the sword that had ennobled him, and added a ring and jewelled hatband. Nor was his other talent forgotten:

he was now commissioned to prepare paintings for the ceiling of Whitehall Palace Banqueting Hall. Among the pictures he painted in England, he offered the King an allegory, *War and Peace*, as a leaving present and this is now in the National Gallery. England and Spain signed their peace treaty in 1630.

Rubens had emerged from the whole affair successfully and with honour. Yet he was tired of politics, already attacked by gout, and anxious once more to remain at home. He declined the proposal of another visit to London. But though he was trying to withdraw from affairs he was not withdrawing from life. In December 1630 he married again, a sixteen-year-old girl, Helena Fourment, and began to enjoy fresh happiness and leisure. He was tired of courts, at Brussels as much as at Madrid, financially worse off for his pains, and determined not to meddle outside painting. The pictures for the Banqueting Hall had to be executed, and the remainder for the Medici Gallery in Paris.

Unfortunately Richelieu had driven Marie de' Medici into banishment and soon into flight. In July 1631 she crossed into the Spanish Netherlands asking protection from the Infanta Isabella. For nearly a year after that Rubens was involved in trying to help her: urging Spain to come to her defence, but quite vainly. He was employed once again to try to make peace with the United Provinces, and this too was unavailing. The Spanish domination was slowly ending; even in the Netherlands there were signs of



unrest—hints of anti-Spanish feeling—that Rubens did not share. Madrid was angry; the Flemish nobles were jealous of Rubens' influence with the Infanta, herself grown old and weary in striving for peace. In face of it all Rubens withdrew. The Infanta withdrew too; she died in December 1633.

There was to be no more painting for the Medici Gallery with the patroness in exile. But Rubens had the Whitehall series to work on and decorations for Antwerp when the new Spanish Governor, brother of Philip IV, arrived in state in April 1635.

Meanwhile Rubens had gained the private life he had previously longed for. His love for Helena Fourment found expression in many paintings of her, sometimes alone and sometimes with their four children. He had also purchased Castle Steen as a country house outside Antwerp and there the whole family spent the last summers of his life. Even in this retirement Rubens did not forget to paint. As if for the first time, his eye fell upon the landscapes of his own country, and in a series of pictures he captured these rich and wooded fields at various times of the day and year; and in many of these last pictures we see the spires of Castle Steen, amid its trees, rising into the sky.

The family were planning to go there again early in May 1640, as summer had come round. But Rubens was suddenly taken ill. The news reached Brussels and doctors were sent to Antwerp to try and cure him. On 30 May he died.

The shady Gerbier was in Brussels, writing a letter

to Charles I in England on 31 May. He mentioned Rubens' serious illness and then, before he posted the letter, he added a postscript: word had just reached Brussels that Rubens was dead. Gerbier added also his own wistfully envious epitaph on Rubens' great career and great possessions; there will be, he wrote, many fine things in the auction sale.

More than most painters Rubens spent the chief portion of his life in the midst of the world and world affairs. His output of pictures, far from being diminished by this, is among the largest any painter—who is any good—has achieved. It is also as varied as it is vast.

But he was not straight away a genius with the instant fire of Michelangelo. Rubens matured rather slowly and much of his early work, while interesting, is not very typical of his talent. In Italy he learnt to paint portraits and these Italianate-style pictures (some still in the families at Genoa for whom they were painted) are already full of Rubens' exuberance: delight in silks, jewels, flowers, skin. But they are painted rather tamely and carefully.

It was not until he returned home to Antwerp that he really could be Italianate without being overshadowed by Italy. He was—it can never be sufficiently remembered—a man of Northern Europe with Northern qualities of carefulness, industry, thrift, and organizing powers. It was not long before his studio was under way, and it was with his studio's aid that he could embark upon great decorative canvases. He

had flower painters, horse and animal painters, available for work of specialization; as well as pupils of general aptitude, and a single pupil perhaps of genius. This was Anthony Van Dyck, a Fleming like Rubens, but very different in personality although his career seems almost to duplicate his master's: now in Italy, painting Genoese bankers and their families, now in England making memorable many otherwise insipid, Cavalier characters, not least Charles I.

Van Dyck is graceful, but Rubens is vigorous. Indeed, it is a point whether some of his huge pictures of florid nymphs, amply Flemish, and rubicund satyrs all festooned with fruit and flushed by wine are not almost caricatures of vigour. But such generosity was part of the splendour of living that these large works were meant to convey: all the sensations of life are not just thrown upon the canvas, but organized into some tremendous pageant whose joyful noise stuns us into acceptance. Rubens offers champagne to a people too long sipping Flemish beer.

It was his power of making a crowded composition not confused but decorative (in the best sense) that helped him into fame. He lived in the last age for pictures that should adorn the rooms they hung in: mythologies, hunting pieces, stories from ancient history. Unlike the Dutch and English painters, he was not restricted to the everyday scene of ordinary life and portraits. And he made splendid use of his freedom; he turned the uneventful tedium of Marie de' Medici's life into a fabulous tale of great and

heroic events in which the heavens joined in, the elements, Jove himself, in a series of pictures (now in the Louvre, Paris) almost ludicrous in their glorification of a woman so inglorious.

With his release of this eternal sense of delight and abundance, went his exuberant handling of paint. No longer was it applied tamely but with as much bravura as a conductor putting his orchestra through its paces. The paint is used boldly, but with astounding control; like the conductor, Rubens dominates the medium even while showing us what it can do.

This lively application, combined with an extraordinary speed, shows most in the many sketches Rubens painted in preparation for grander compositions. When he came to the large picture he often had to employ studio assistants; for this reason some of the big works have lost the vivacity of his original sketches. A sketch of *Diana and Endymion*, in the National Gallery, has all the breathless fluency which Rubens was master of; hardly a painting, it is almost a drawing in oil, showing not a placid goddess gazing upon a sleeping mortal but a radiant woman rushing into the arms of a young man quite wide-awake. In the background the horses of Diana's chariot rear up impatiently, and long streams of vapour are blown from their nostrils.

The sense of haste and bustle has its own poetry. It is part of the active energy of Rubens' conceptions that his pictures are full of things happening. Even when in repose, his broad-shouldered saints, tossing their symbolic anchors and chains and crosses like so

many cabers, suggest potential strength. Although there may be physical agony behind such play of muscle—as in the straining body of Christ suspended on the Cross—there is little mental anguish.

Rubens' temperament was neither nervous nor anguished; the dark side of human nature was unplumbed by him, for he never had to experience it. Like his pictures, his life was a triumph, of fecundity and happiness. He accepted the world in which he lived, and its conventions: the divine right of kings like Philip of Spain and queens like Marie de' Medici—his glorification of them was not insincere, even while he met them in ordinary life without flattery and with honesty. He believed in the Roman Catholic church and its teachings: another force for conserving things as they are—and he worked well in its service.

But in addition to the public aspect of his work there is another, perhaps now more immediately sympathetic. Rubens has shared with us the intimacy of his own home and family, in pictures where pride and love mingle. He painted his first wife often, but Helena Fourment more often still. She was the inspiration for a whole series of paintings, naked or clothed, with or without her children, in which Rubens' brush caresses the paint into being flesh, hair, folds of a fur robe or dress—each picture like a poem from a passionate lover to his lady. But this feeling Helena Fourment has shared, in one picture at least, with her sister Susanna: Rubens painted Susanna in the *Chapeau de Paille*, now in the National Gallery. Here his superb grasp of human reality

combines with the brilliant flair of his brush in a picture that has been accepted as a masterpiece. It is full of blonde light which falls most clearly, not on the face slightly shaded by its feather-decorated hat, but on the neck and breasts: a pearl tone which is set off by the greyish green and red drapery of the sleeves. Out of the pale shadow the face looks out, with the quick candid gaze of life.

Observation came from Rubens' exuberance; exuberance from his delight in observation. He was as skilled in drawing as in painting—many of his pencil and crayon sketches show the intense detail of which his eye was capable. Only at the last did he turn that trained equipment upon the landscape of Flanders. The pictures were smaller, for he had no studio at Steen. He worked more fitfully, for gout often attacked his painting hand. These paintings were private pictures for himself alone—some are listed in the inventory made after his death.

What is perhaps one of these, a *Sunset Landscape*, is in the National Gallery. It is simply an extent of countryside lit by the low rays of setting sun—the white disc of which is sinking to the horizon, and a premature autumn reddens the few trees clustered about the roof of Castle Steen. Freely painted, it is tender rather than exuberant; nothing fills the dusky landscape but a few browsing sheep and a solitary shepherd playing his pipe.

Instead of with the drums and brass of his great decorative canvases, it is with such muted music that Rubens came to his end.

## IV

### *REMBRANDT*

THE seventeenth century in Europe saw the rise of a new country: Holland. From the first the Dutch were industrious. Their trade prospered, their cities grew rich, and in intellectual matters they were soon busily employed. The country was full of scholars and lawyers—indeed the scholars often were the lawyers, and vice versa. Everything was to be noted: from astronomy to the arts. It was an age for books as learned as their authors could make them. Just such a scholarly lawyer arrived at Leyden in 1628, one Van Buchell who was compiling notes for a learned Latin book on painting. He added a fresh note to his collection: that there was a Leyden miller's son highly, but prematurely, esteemed for painting.

This sub-acid sentence, recorded in Latin, is now Van Buchell's sole claim to our attention, for his sentence passed the first critical judgment upon Rembrandt.

At the time Rembrandt was still a very young man; his years of great fame lay before him, but Van Buchell had already heard of him and noted him as someone to consider. As it is, history has considered Van Buchell since he happened to mention one of the world's more famous men. Nor did the notes ever become a book; they remained unpublished when Van

Buchell died and were printed, at last, some thirty years ago.

Rembrandt was born on 15 July 1606, the son of a miller, Harmen Gerritszoon Van Rhijn, at his parents' home in Leyden. He was the youngest but one of seven children, the last being his sister Lysbeth whom he later painted. His father was quite prosperous and Rembrandt seems to have been destined for a scholarly career, unlike his four elder brothers who grew up to trades; one of them became a baker, (and Rembrandt's mother was, not unsuitably for the wife of a miller, the daughter of a baker).

Rembrandt attended first the local grammar school. On 20 May 1620 he was entered at Leyden University as a student. Holland had only recently emerged as a nation out of the Spanish Netherlands—the Netherlands that remained under Spain being the country where Rubens lived and worked. It was in fact for Leyden's bravery in resisting the Spanish attack that William the Silent, Holland's president rather than its king, had rewarded the city by endowing it with a university.

It is inevitable in some ways to contrast the different climates in which Rubens and Rembrandt, active contemporaries for some years, produced each their different art. While the world of Rubens darkened, that of Rembrandt was advancing in prosperity and helping to mould Dutch art—itself part of the patriotism of a new, small, but proud and energetic nation.

Rembrandt quickly showed that he had no interest in scholarship. He seems very soon to have persuaded



his parents to allow him to be apprenticed to the only profession in which he was interested. He entered the studio of a Leyden painter. For three years he worked under a certain Van Swanenburgh who was esteemed in his home town at any rate as a good citizen, and perhaps as a good painter. Of this master it is sufficient to say that while he may have been the former he was not the latter.

At the end of three years Rembrandt's father allowed him, and probably encouraged him, to go to Amsterdam, the city which had built itself up into a centre of Dutch culture and trade. In Amsterdam there was an atmosphere less provincial than at Leyden. Rembrandt became the pupil of Pieter Lastman, and Lastman had travelled in Italy, been influenced by the Italian painters, and produced his own odd blend of Italianate subjects with Dutch realism. His pictures are often grotesque, even pompous, but occasionally relieved by passages of delightful colour. His influence on Rembrandt was considerable; through him Rembrandt came in touch with the country that was exercising a spell over all Northern painting—but Rembrandt himself never visited Italy. And there was in Rembrandt a weakness for the grotesque that Lastman may well have accentuated. Lastman was the subject of a certain amount of praise by a Dutch poet, Vondel, who enjoyed a great vogue in his day, but whose verse is of considerably less artistic value than Lastman's own very minor pictures.

After six months at Amsterdam Rembrandt returned home to Leyden. He now established himself

as an independent painter. Also back at Leyden again was his friend the painter Lievens—who had also studied at Amsterdam under Lastman—and the two friends were soon hailed as a promising pair of young artists.

Rembrandt's early pictures were very much in Lastman's manner. But as well as these he practised etching and after his return to Leyden executed the first of his many self-portraits, as well as etchings of his family—who were easily available as models to the artist who lived again in his parents' house. Already in these, and in one or two paintings of his family—for example, his mother reading her Bible—the power of characterization and the use of light and shade show an advance on anything Lastman could possibly conceive.

A year or two after Van Buchell made his one-sentence note on Rembrandt, another rather more widely cultured person discussed the young but promising painter. This was Constantin Huygens, part statesman, part courtier, part scholar, himself still young yet occupied with his autobiography; he wrote poetry, read Chaucer and Shakespeare, and had once climbed the cathedral spire at Strasbourg. He was interested also in painters and painting; he had a great admiration for Rubens, and almost as great an admiration for Rembrandt and his friend Lievens.

Huygens emphasized, perhaps exaggerated, the humble circumstances of Rembrandt's birth. He was excited by Rembrandt's historical pictures whose dramatic compositions are in fact among the painter's

less successful works. He longed for Rembrandt to go to Italy and see the work of Raphael and Michelangelo—rather as Rubens had once made the pilgrimage. However, Rembrandt remained at Leyden. This was not laziness; in fact he was working so hard that Huygens thought he might endanger his health. But Rembrandt did not want to break that routine of work, even by a visit to Italy; Italian pictures were passing often enough through Holland, and he himself was later to own some.

Rembrandt was never to travel at all. A legend used to be current that he came on a visit to England, but this is not so. The powers of Rembrandt are in concentration; he neither needed, nor was interested in, the stimulus of foreign travel; his inspiration, his models, and the whole curious trend of his thought, were conditioned by being Dutch and by remaining in Holland.

As well as writing about Rembrandt, Constantin Huygens helped him by obtaining commissions for him. Portraits were in great demand and Rembrandt's likenesses met with considerable success. Huygens' elder brother was portrayed, and Huygens' brother-in-law, but we do not seem to know whether Huygens himself ever sat to the painter.

The desire for a portrait in oils was part of pride in the prosperity which Holland had obtained. Since Amsterdam was one of the centres of this prosperity it was natural that there should be a demand there for the best that money could buy. There were new streets and new houses, and pictures were needed to

cover the space—much as to-day in mayoral parlours oil paintings of previous mayors are required for the walls. Amsterdam was a second, more bourgeois Venice; as in Venice, its trade was its lifeblood. Soon merchants in Amsterdam were commissioning portraits from the Leyden painter; it was inevitable that Rembrandt would move to Amsterdam.

And here his career expanded. Rembrandt moved there in 1631 and lived at first with an art dealer. Even at Leyden his studio had held at least one talented pupil—the painter Dou—and at Amsterdam he took more pupils. As well as by individual patrons, he was patronized by the rich trade and professional guilds; his first big commission came from the Guild of Surgeons in the year after he arrived at Amsterdam. He painted the *Anatomy Lesson* (now in the Mauritshuis, at The Hague) which shows a famous surgeon of the day, Doctor Tulp, lecturing over a corpse to a group of doctors. The picture was painted for the anatomy theatre of the Guild and a certain macabreness in the subject was almost essential. But the interest lies in Rembrandt's seizure of the different expressions on the different faces of the group, and the pattern he has created from their heads, each set off with a white ruff against their dark clothes and the dark background.

The portrait group was almost as popular a Dutch subject as the single portrait. It is not a subject which has found much popularity elsewhere; earlier than Rembrandt it was being practised by Frans Hals, a painter of Haarlem, not without monotony of effect.

The posing of some ten to twenty Dutchmen, clad exactly alike, in a large canvas, well lit so as to do justice to each of their faces, was an unenviable task. Out of this commonplace material Frans Hals had produced no more than commonplace paintings; Rembrandt evoked something very different, and the *Anatomy Lesson* was only the first group picture by him.

Rembrandt worked as wholeheartedly at Amsterdam as he had at Leyden. He had many more applications from sitters than he had leisure to paint; in fact it was said that he was being begged to paint, as well as being paid for his labours. While his prosperity was increasing—but had not reached its peak—Rembrandt married. His wife was Saskia Van Uylenborch, an orphan whose cousin was the picture-dealer with whom Rembrandt had stayed on his arrival in Amsterdam. They were married in June 1634 and probably from that year dates Rembrandt's picture of himself and Saskia (now at Dresden). Saskia herself was comparatively wealthy and the Dresden picture is a celebration of wealth and prosperity: a peacock pie is on the table; Rembrandt clasps Saskia on his knee with one hand while he raises a glass of wine with the other. He laughs, and she seems mildly embarrassed. There is some awkwardness in the picture, as well as in the jolly atmosphere; the painter is rather weighed down by his feather-brimmed hat, and a sword—symbol of prosperous respectability—is prominently buckled about him. There is still a love of grotesqueness, with the cheerful depiction of wine and women, and a

weakness for stage properties like hats and swords which Rembrandt never lost.

In 1639 Rembrandt and Saskia moved to a new and grand house in Amsterdam. Here the painter assembled the armour, jewellery, bizarre costumes, helmets and weapons that pleased him, turning his studio almost into an antique shop. His pictures were reproduced in etchings and prints—not only in his studio but by outside etchers and engravers: this carried his name abroad. Charles I of England owned three of his pictures by about 1640; artists in Italy were already copying from his etchings some years earlier than that. An English visitor, Peter Mundy, who was in Amsterdam in 1640 mentioned only one famous Dutch painter: 'Rimbrantt'.

That year Rembrandt's mother died. She had been the subject of some of his most sympathetic early work and it is difficult not to date a change in his art from this year. But in that year he produced the last of his opulent self-portraits, one now in the National Gallery, London, in which the pose is derived from Titian's *Portrait of a Man* also there now (and mentioned in the chapter on Titian). In the portrait of 1640 Rembrandt has curbed the ostentation of earlier days; instead of a bourgeois out on a spree he now might seem a prince, calm, dignified, even aloof.

It was only a moment of calm. The next year Saskia gave birth to her fourth child, Titus, the last and only one of their four children to survive. Titus was born in September 1641, and probably Rembrandt had already started on his large picture the *Night Watch*,

which was the second of his group pictures and which has become the most famous. The legends that have grown up around this painting are as many as they are inaccurate, beginning with the misleading title by which the picture is known. In fact the scene is intended for broad daylight—a fact which has become clearer since the picture was, quite recently, cleaned. It shows a band of the Civic Guard, led by their Captain, and was commissioned to adorn a hall of their headquarters in Amsterdam: like a school photograph it was intended as a record of the appearance of the Civic Guard in 1642, and their names are given on a shield in the picture (probably added by a pupil of Rembrandt's).

It was in subject one more addition to the Dutch portrait-group type of picture. But in effect it was very different, for Rembrandt's picture is not static but active: the light is disposed capriciously to make a pattern of faces, patches of clothing, weapons, drums, and in this atmosphere the old style group-photograph of Frans Hals is totally forgotten. For many years it has been customary, at this point in Rembrandt's biography, to tell how displeased the Civic Guard were when they saw what the painter had done. Ink has been splashed about in this romantic cause, and cliché and lie jostled together to make a misunderstood artist out of Rembrandt.

In fact Rembrandt was well paid for his pains—a contemporary said that each man had paid 100 guilders to be portrayed (quite a tolerable sum of money—it was what Rembrandt's pupils paid him

per year for their training); his picture hung for some sixty years in the hall for which it was painted and was finally moved to the town hall of Amsterdam. Unfortunately we have little comment on the *Night Watch* by the painter's contemporaries: no evidence that the Civic Guard thought they had obtained either a masterpiece or a bad bargain.

It was in his private life that Rembrandt suffered. It seems likely that Saskia never recovered her health fully after the birth of Titus; in June 1642 she died. A darkness closes over Rembrandt's life at this point; he seems not unnaturally to have lived in more retirement. His household was in the charge of Titus' nurse, a widow called Geertghe Dircx, and to this was added, about 1645, a maid, Hendrickje Stoffels.

The household was, however, clearly far from contented. Some jealousy existed between the two women, and Rembrandt was the cause. Geertghe Dircx soon appeared in court accusing the painter of having seduced her, promising to marry her, and failing to marry her. Rembrandt denied the whole affair, perhaps with truth. Geertghe Dircx left the household and later became insane; she died in an asylum.

In her place Hendrickje Stoffels became not only the painter's housekeeper but his mistress as well. There is no doubt that he would have married her but Saskia had anticipated such an eventuality in her will: all her money was available to Rembrandt provided he did not re-marry, whereupon it passed to her son Titus. Hendrickje also became one of Rembrandt's favourite models. Already a modifica-



tion was apparent in the painter's work; to some extent he was withdrawing into an intimacy with his subjects which shows greater psychological depth than his earlier pictures had. As always, his obsession with his own face—no other painter has left so many self-portraits—helps us to keep some track on his emotions; in a painting of this time (now in Vienna) he faces the spectator boldly but sadly, no longer dressed in gala clothes but in the working clothes of a painter.

In 1652 Dutch prosperity was damaged by war. For long the English had struggled with Holland over trade and over who should rule the sea; probably the Civil War in England had averted an open conflict, but this broke out after Cromwell came to power. The prosperity of Rembrandt was probably already affected; for he was careless in money matters, his house was heavily mortgaged, and like all sensitive and sensible people he valued money for what it bought not for what it was. It is this difference that separates artists from financiers. So Rembrandt gradually grew poor.

It seems he also grew less popular. Perhaps the patrons demanded new things, or more probably Rembrandt was less obliging; he was painting more for himself, expressing more private moods. Meanwhile Amsterdam began to feel the strain made by war; in 1653 Holland's great and gallant admiral Van Tromp fell in action. In the next year peace was made and the Dutch conceded a good deal to England.

By now Rembrandt was hopelessly in debt. In his private affairs there was still a difficulty in the fact that

he had not married Hendrickje Stoffels. In 1654 she gave birth to a daughter, Cornelia. Although Holland is often thought of as a country of tolerance, and it later proved for the English philosopher Locke a pleasant asylum (in which he wrote his epistle on tolerance), the Protestant Church in Amsterdam repeatedly ordered Hendrickje to appear before its council to be reprimanded. A few months before her daughter was born she received a serious reproof for her way of life and she was forbidden communion.

Society was to reject Rembrandt and his household further. In the year of Cornelia's birth the painter made some attempt to give up his house and move to a smaller one; but he was already in difficulty with the owners, and perhaps they were not going to let him leave. Gradually but very definitely, his creditors closed in upon him. Rembrandt now had no money to meet any of their demands. In July 1656 he was desperate; he appealed to the High Court at The Hague to intervene; he explained that his losses came partly through failures in trading and mishaps at sea; and he named his creditors one by one.

The Court had power to intervene and save a debtor from bankruptcy, while ensuring that the creditors received such money as might be obtained. The matter of Rembrandt's ruin was discussed first at The Hague and then referred to the burgomasters of Amsterdam. But it seemed as if nothing could avert the blow. On 26 July an inventory was ordered to be drawn up of everything Rembrandt possessed; this task occupied two days; a bill was presented to the

painter for the cost of drawing up the inventory and the time taken: one more bill he probably could not pay.

The lists of what he then possessed have survived, and from the descriptions it seems as if Rembrandt had led the clerk round the house explaining what everything was. There was an allegorical picture, painted no doubt by himself; there were fine engravings after Raphael, a book said to be illustrated by Mantegna. Later, witnesses during the process of bankruptcy—among them a goldsmith friend of Rembrandt's, Jan Van Loo—described pearl necklaces, diamond ear-rings, as well as other jewellery. All these things Rembrandt himself estimated highly; in fact he estimated them rather at their value to him than at their real market price.

The position was complicated because his son, Titus, who was now nearly fifteen, was entitled to share all the things that had belonged to Saskia (whose will had been carefully drawn up). A sale of Rembrandt's pictures (i.e. those belonging to him) took place in the December of 1657, and this was followed by other sales. In February 1658 his house was due to be sold; then the furniture from it. But we hear of one chest that was still there, containing some linen and jewels which belonged to Hendrickje Stoffels, and this solitary piece of furniture was probably all that was left unsold. In the autumn of 1658 a sale of Rembrandt's drawings and prints took place; this brought in only a very small sum of money.

In the days of his prosperity Rembrandt had been generous, but he had also been considered eccentric.

Reasons for this judgment by his contemporaries are uncertain, but seem chiefly to consist in their surprise that he wiped his brushes on his clothes when pre-occupied in painting. He had always been ready to lend any of his studio properties—those helmets, costumes, swords he bought up so eagerly; he had helped younger artists; for the honour of his profession he had bid high at picture auctions so that the work of great painters should not pass cheaply.

This behaviour had not always endeared him to other living painters, nor to the picture-dealers (who already swarmed plentifully in Holland). There was at Amsterdam a Guild of Saint Luke—the patron of painters since he is said to have painted the Virgin—and the Guild did to some extent look after its members. Rembrandt was a member, but there was bad feeling between the Guild and him. They had passed an ordinance in August 1658 that those who had permission to sell their pictures, drawings, and so on—and permission was needed—had to proceed to the sale as soon as possible. Rembrandt had been bound by this. It is likely that he was pressed into naming a day for the sale of his prints and drawings before the news could be published widely enough; hence many foreign dealers could not attend, and hence also the poor total money from the sale.

By another Guild requirement, no painter might set up a shop for selling his work, nor sell privately—though it is difficult to see how he could otherwise dispose of his pictures. No doubt the law was to stop painters turning their studios into shops. It hit at

Rembrandt, however, with crippling effect, for he was living on the proceeds of his etchings. In the last months of 1658 Hendrickje Stoffels and Titus combined to circumvent the law; they acted for Rembrandt in selling his etchings and by this means he could keep alive.

In 1660 this agreement between Hendrickje and Titus was confirmed, but Hendrickje had to remain the responsible partner for legally Titus was still a minor. The arrangement was that each received a half of the profits of the business. Rembrandt lived with them, and they were to allow him free board and lodging on condition he helped them in everything. Only one thing was forbidden him: a share in the business, since he was a bankrupt. But the two partners might lend him money. In a far-sighted legal way, the partnership of Hendrickje and Titus was declared to remain a business for six years after Rembrandt's death; in fact the painter survived them both.

But these arrangements had already given Rembrandt a certain security. Nor was he left unprotected by the city. Just before his bankruptcy Amsterdam had inaugurated its new City Hall; the building's appearance on the scene was hailed by the mediocre Vondel, that poet who had celebrated Rembrandt's early teacher, Lastman. A whole series of pictures was to be painted in the City Hall and a pupil of Rembrandt's, Govaert Flinck, was chosen as artist. Before he could begin he died in 1660. Instead of one painter a group of painters, perhaps as a precaution against death, were now chosen, and Rem-

brandt among them. He was given a subject derived from Tacitus: of Batavians (i.e. the Dutch) plotting against the dominion of Rome (which may be interpreted as Spain). The scene was to be set at night, and perhaps it was because of the painter's fame as conveyor of light and darkness that this subject, the first of the series, had been given to him.

But although he delivered the vast canvas, something about it made it unacceptable. It was in the City Hall by 1662; by 1663 it had gone. We do not know if it was returned to him because of alterations which were made to the original plan of the room in the City Hall, or, more probably, because Rembrandt's conception did not please the City Fathers—who at all times and places are notoriously hard to please in such matters. It would also be a factor that the City Fathers could buy a canvas of the same size, also covered with paint, from a less expensive painter; this, in fact, they proceeded to do. As for the poet Vondel, his vast output, often in doggerel verse, mentions his ideas on art at some length, but omits to mention Rembrandt at all.

But in 1662 Rembrandt finished another civic commission which did not end so unsuccessfully. He had painted one more group portrait, this time of the five syndics of the Cloth Hall of Amsterdam, a picture which was not only intended for but did reach the Cloth Hall. Simplicity could hardly go further than in the depiction of these black-clad men with their black hats, seated in a panelled room at a table covered by a red carpet. The picture is among the most com-

elling Rembrandt ever painted: the atmosphere is at once tense and intimate. The faces which turn towards the spectator have recently been found by one critic to be deliberately smug and hostile—as if arraigning the painter who had offended financially and morally against their code. Perhaps this is going further than the painting warrants. But there is a just speculation as to the state of mind in which the impoverished and aging painter, further bereaved at the same period by Hendrickje's death, painted the five prosperous bourgeois.

Rembrandt and Titus now lived on alone with Hendrickje's daughter, Cornelia. These last years saw the painter touching all his sitters with a certain weary sadness, but with some air of triumphing over all things. He was not so totally neglected as used to be believed; those who were painted by him, the usual inevitable plain citizens, took on almost a symbolic quality, a profundity which, while often exaggerated, does seem truly present in these late pictures.

Perhaps in some minor way Rembrandt's affairs even prospered a little; in 1665 he could afford to redeem nine pictures and two books which he had earlier pawned. And in June of that year Titus, for so long treated as an adult, attained his legal majority. Three years later he married. His wife was the daughter of the goldsmith Jan Van Loo who had given evidence at the time of Rembrandt's ruin. Yet if this marriage seemed to mark a return to normal life, after many cares, for the family, it too was doomed to tragic brevity. On 7 September 1668, the same year as he had married, Titus was buried at Amsterdam.

Rembrandt was now sixty-three. He was still painting. His final self-portraits are those of a man who has at last become utterly resigned—in itself a sort of wisdom. More moving perhaps is the subject of a picture which also dates from very late in his life: the *Return of the Prodigal Son* (at Leningrad). Here in a twilight silence the old father puts out his hands and embraces the kneeling figure of his son who has come home.

In March 1669 a granddaughter was born to Rembrandt, and she was given the name Titia in memory of her father. It is almost the last event in the painter's life, for once a birth instead of a death; but in the same year Rembrandt himself died, on 4 October 1669.

One inventory had yet to be drawn up, very different from the earlier lists of treasures he had once possessed. On 5 October the few miserable possessions which Rembrandt owned were solemnly catalogued: a quilt or two, a bedstead, some clothes, some painting equipment. So the compiler, or compilers, went from room to room noting what they could see. Three rooms in the house were locked; these contained what was treasured, and what was important—the painter's drawings, pictures, etchings. It was impossible to list their contents. At the bottom of the inventory a note was made that the keys for these rooms were at the notary's; and we never hear of them again.

As for the two books that Rembrandt had quite lately been able to redeem from the pawnbroker, these



perhaps were a gift to his daughter-in-law, Titia's mother. They were possibly the two books which were in her possession when she died, books of Rembrandt's own etchings. She did not long survive her father-in-law, perhaps was already ill when he died; her burial is recorded on 21 October 1669.

We know little of Rembrandt's personality, and not much about his life except his money troubles, from the documents that have survived. However, we have the dangerous documents that he has left in his many self-portraits at all ages—dangerous because they can be interpreted very much as we please. He died in Amsterdam in 1669 and since then history has been at work weaving its legend about him. He is certainly among the great painters who have been overpraised; his work has been treated as if it were the New and the Old Testament combined, and religious awe has characterized his nineteenth- and twentieth-century biographers—chiefly his own countrymen of course, and then the Germans.

Rembrandt is a Northern artist despite the sympathy he felt for some things Italian, and despite the sympathy Italians—like the painter Guercino and the early biographer Baldinucci—felt for him. He was trained in the North, in a poor school. The Dutch painters were painfully lacking in imagination and in real visual power. They had rejected the Roman Catholic faith (which has always used pictures as part of its atmosphere of worship) and all that went with it; their own church interiors were bare of decoration,

as were their clothes. This was one imaginative source checked. There was also little sympathy in Holland for classical stories and the sort of cheerful pagan allegories that Rubens delighted in painting. In fact the Dutch had made a cult of puritanism: with puritanism usually goes an emphasis upon prosperity, wealth, health, and a pride in being a good citizen. These admirable qualities do not necessarily encourage the arts. Before Rembrandt the Dutch painters had to depend upon Dutch patronage: this meant that they had to produce portraits (an oil painting of oneself being a high sign of respectability) both of individuals and of those clubs that the Dutch invented, all the members seated stolidly bovine and depressingly healthy. The painters might also reproduce other objects of everyday life like trees, farm-houses, pots, pans, and cows (Holland appears to have been grossly overstocked with cows).

One thing saved this painful reproduction of ordinary reality from the prosaic: light. The flat landscape of Holland helps to emphasize the shifting light and shade of the sky; and the wide expanses of water reflect this pattern. Even the most minor Dutch masters often caught something of this eternally changing liquidity: the atmospheric envelope in which we live and breathe.

Rembrandt was from the first unusually sensitive to such effects. His early pictures, even when ugly or grotesque, are still full of light and shade manipulated so dexterously that they are more important than the subject. In fact Rembrandt could play tricks with

such effects as to deceive the eye; but he fortunately did not remain content with such obvious devices.

Something else was present in him, also a part of Dutch tradition which he was to touch into genius; out of the prosaic idea of stolid portraiture he evolved his extraordinary sympathy with personalities. This came to him only slowly; even an awareness of his own face as a mirror of emotions and events was hardly there at first. In the early portraits of his family, perhaps above all of his mother, he showed his ability to seize the reality so vividly that we cannot fail to be moved. There is a tenderness in such pictures that seems part of the dusky atmosphere; his mother sits over her Bible, anxious, tired, seen in this moment of intimacy with a quiet truth that is penetrating for its very quietness.

From the first he manipulated unusual colour schemes, using tones of violet and lemon yellow, setting off a patch of brilliantly lit robe or sky against a smoky background, conveying atmosphere so thickly that, as Goethe said, we feel we are breathing the darkness. At first too, Rembrandt used the medium of paint in a smooth and enamel-like way. Gradually he grew bolder; his sureness reached a peak where he could whip the paint on, smudge it into being a fur cap, a finger, the crease in a glove or in an old man's cheek.

At the height of his fame, at the time of the *Night Watch*, he could compose a packed composition of figures in a solid cube of atmosphere where thick sunlight falls, is dissipated in shadow, retreats into

the obscurity in the background of the picture—and out of this blended air the members of the Civic Guard stride forward. He was already painting boldly, but was to paint more boldly still. In the days of success at Amsterdam he had many commissions of banality; all that was asked of him was a good likeness. He supplied it, but he gave also something keener; even in the portraits where light bathes the whole canvas he manages to control it, to convey the textures of lace, of satin, the gleam of jewels (which he loved), subordinating these to the face, and the face itself to the whole pattern of light and pale shadows.

Behind the public mask of the prosperous painter there was a private face of the artist. Rembrandt himself recorded this face literally and often enough. There are his drawings, in which a few strokes of a quill pen set before us a mill, a clump of trees, his son reading: each jotted down as a note of reality, perhaps in preparation for a painting or perhaps no more than his spontaneous re-creation of what he has glimpsed. There are his etchings, and it was by means of these that Rembrandt's fame travelled far in his own life. His etchings reached Genoa, and painters there copied them; they were not left unnoticed by the omnivorous but unattractive diarist, Evelyn, who dabbled in the subject as he dabbled in everything. 'The incomparable Reinbrand' gets a mention in his *Sculptura*, published in London seven years before Rembrandt died.

And there was one other private world which Rembrandt might evoke. His countrymen had re-

jected the elaborate dogmas of Roman Catholicism for the severe simplicity of the Bible; although vast religious compositions of the type Rubens produced were forbidden to Rembrandt, the life of Christ offered him opportunities for proving his ability to sympathize and to interpret. He has treated many scenes from the New Testament in small pictures and in etchings; in these we see delineated a new conception of Christ's life and teaching, in which the Son of Man is Himself one more of the poor, as ordinary-seeming as they are, as weak when He falls under the Cross, as simple when He breaks bread at Emmaus. These pictures and etchings are among the first, if not the very first, to emphasize the humanity of the Gospel story; and they are part of the sympathy with humanity that Rembrandt felt.

It seems as if only within those terms could Rembrandt conceive Christ's life, and His parables; the supernatural element interested him less, and instead of visions of heaven or hell his vision was upon earth. It was as a mother that he conceived the Virgin at the foot of the Cross; his Pontius Pilate is not a Roman governor but a caricature of fear and bestiality. When Christ preaches it is not in a reconstructed Jerusalem, but in seventeenth-century Amsterdam. All these things are part of that passionate pursuit of reality, transfigured by his imagination, for which Rembrandt neglected everything else.

His own worldly ruin, whether his fault or bad luck, deepened this passion for the real and the human. His self-portraits lose their grand and rather arro-

gantly cheerful air; as his features suffered under sorrow, age, poverty, so the paint begins to suffer on his canvases; it is thrown upon them thickly, twisted and worked into a texture like clotted foam.

When he had a sitter apart from himself he invested him too with a certain muted sadness; often it was the old who attracted him and whose faces offered him that combination of suffering and bravery which always moves us. Late in his life, and in theirs, Jacob and Margaretha Trip sat for their portraits (now in the National Gallery). Margaretha Trip is perhaps the more impressive; she sits upright in a chair, one hand clasping the chair arm—and this hand alone has been worked at again and again. There are hints of blue in it, shadows about the protruding knuckles, lines of paint, some blurred, small scratches of yellow rubbed into red, a few streaks of white: all reassembling as one draws away into a tight rather clawlike hand, the fingers bent a little stiffly, an old hand, withered, tremulous, itself part of the personality of Margaretha Trip. Her mouth is sunken; her chin projects above a circle of white nearly transparent lawn ruff; she gazes out severely, half sadly—propped on her chair against a shadowy wall. The face and hands and the ruff alone meet the light; there is no more composition than her body set centrally in the picture. Her humanity matters to us only because Rembrandt has evoked it—more vividly, and more lastingly, than it ever existed outside his painting.

In just the same way the facts about Rembrandt's life are insignificant against that life as he has shown

it to us in the long chain of self-portraits. The life and its events had about them nothing very extraordinary; it is a mistake to pretend that Rembrandt passed his days in the depths of private despair after a series of monstrous accidents brought about by fate. It is what he has made of his life that now matters to us; we see his face undergoing change almost before our eyes, and character emerging out of the commonplace features of the young and brash painter.

This life-giving effect Rembrandt did not reserve for his own portraits, as we have seen. His sympathy went out to the poor, the old, the eccentric—increasingly as time passed. He was a witness to the spectacle of living, resigned rather than explanatory, occupied by painting and deserted at the end by everything except painting.

In a poem Baudelaire compares life to a hospital where every patient is anxious to change his bed. The same comparison comes to him when he writes of Rembrandt; he evokes what might almost be an etching: of a sad hospital lit by a wintry ray of sun, one wall decorated by a crucifix, a hospital ward full of the murmuring of its patients. More than Rembrandt perhaps, Baudelaire might claim a life of unalleviated misery—without a Titus or a Hendrickje Stoffels. The poet and the painter came together in their recognition of the conditions of our existence: we are all patients in a hospital, but we go on because we believe we shall soon be better. Like the crucifix on the wall in Baudelaire's comparison, there is, amid the resignation and pathos of Rembrandt hope.

## V

### G A I N S B O R O U G H

NINE years after Gainsborough's death Constable was down in Suffolk, their common native county. He wrote to a friend in London, who had hoped for anecdotes about the older painter, that nothing was to be gleaned there. It was not so surprising, for Gainsborough's mature life was spent mostly in a more urban scene: either at Bath or London.

But something lingered, to Constable's eye, reminding him that Gainsborough was born a countryman. 'I fancy,' he wrote, 'that I see Gainsborough in every hedge and hollow tree.'

Gainsborough's native town was Sudbury, on the river Stour, and there the Gainsborough family had been for many generations. They were chiefly wool merchants by profession and Dissenters by religion; Gainsborough's father was both. At Sudbury in May 1727 Gainsborough was baptized—not in a church but at the Independent Meeting House—and was given the name Thomas. He was the youngest of five sons and had four sisters.

There was a vein of unconventionality in this Gainsborough family. They stood apart, first, from the ordinary Church of England of their day and practised a more direct and simple Christianity,



anticipating Wesley and Methodism. One of Gainsborough's brothers became a dissenting minister. Another, known as 'scheming Jack', developed a passion for eccentric inventions and lived at Sudbury in a state of desperate poverty, surrounded by seven daughters and a mechanical cuckoo which sang the whole year round. Their father, John Gainsborough, was generous to the extent of rashness, a trait his son Thomas inherited. And their mother is said to have been an amateur painter.

Gainsborough, then, inherited that talent also. He early displayed his ability and we have his own word that it was his starting on the picture, *Cornard Wood* (in the National Gallery, London) which made his father decide that he must be sent to London. This picture, Gainsborough says, he began while still at school. It is difficult to know how to accept the remark. At the time of going to London Gainsborough was about thirteen and the picture was not finished until he was twenty-one. Yet nothing in it reveals that one part was painted by a boy, the other by a man. It is possible that he repainted the early portion when finishing the picture.

At thirteen Gainsborough found himself in London and he apparently lodged in the house of a friendly silversmith. What he thought of the exchange of provincial Sudbury for London, we do not know. It seems, however, to have suited him. His early biographers often inclined to say it suited him too well and that it taught him habits of dissipation. Such habits can as easily be acquired in the country as in

the town. And the dissipations of Gainsborough were so mild and occasional that they seem tame after the lurid hints of his biographers.

In London Gainsborough probably worked hard, but he does not seem to have been the pupil of any particular master, nor to have attended very diligently at any art-school. Later in life the label 'self taught' was applied to him by both friends and enemies. It no longer surprises us that a painter so gifted could teach himself, and in fact most of the painters then in London could themselves have benefited by taking a lesson or two from him.

The city had become a centre of some culture. Even visitors from Paris had occasionally been a little envious of English liberty and English intellects. Although it would be a slander to imply that George II was interested in the arts, his death was to bring to the throne George III who founded the Royal Academy and patronized Gainsborough. At the time of Gainsborough's first arrival in London painting in England still lagged behind the other arts; the native school was best represented by Hogarth whose vivid portrayal of the gaiety and squalor of the period is as valuable as would be a set of good photographs. Hogarth was robustly pro-English, though his painted comments upon his contemporaries might make us wonder why.

Gainsborough was fortunate enough, soon after his arrival in London, to meet a French artist, Hubert Gravelot, and he seems to have become for a while Gravelot's assistant. Gravelot has been touched into

a certain fame by his contact with Gainsborough; probably through him Gainsborough became aware of French art and especially, we may guess, Watteau's pictures. Watteau had died young in 1721; his elegant yet melancholy paintings are full of evocation rather than statement: touches of colour to convey the shimmer of silks, the feathery foliage of trees. And this lightness of touch was to become a special mark of Gainsborough's way of painting.

As well as French pictures (or engravings of them) Gainsborough must have studied Dutch and Flemish pictures—chiefly landscapes of the century before. These, with their steady realism very different from Watteau's enchanted scenery, also exercised an appeal over him and his own first landscapes were in a Dutch manner.

He was possibly painting these early in his London days, and also some small portraits. There does not seem, even then, to have been any difficulty about disposing of his work; from his arrival in London, a friend said after his death, he cost his parents nothing.

Soon he had an additional income, for he married in 1746 and his wife brought with her an annuity of £200 a year. She was Margaret Burr, an illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Beaufort—through whom no doubt her money came. They were married in London at the Mayfair chapel, a favourite location for secret weddings as the consent of parents was not needed there. In addition to her comfortable annuity Margaret Burr was young and beautiful; she was also Scottish, and her parsimony was practised with

Scottish rigour. Nor, as time proved, was her temper one that could appeal to anyone as good-humoured and carefree as Gainsborough. Like many of the wives of great men who have made unhappy marriages, she survived her husband.

Gainsborough had perhaps met his wife on a visit in Suffolk and they probably returned there after their marriage—at first to Sudbury but later to Ipswich. In Suffolk Gainsborough's two daughters were probably born: Mary (the elder), and Margaret. They were nicknamed by their father 'Molly and the Captain'; his many portraits of them are among the most sympathetic and charming he ever produced. It was probably in the Ipswich days that he painted the picture of them chasing a butterfly: a masterpiece of intimacy and charm, its intimacy somehow enhanced by the fact that it is not finished. It is now in the National Gallery, London. At the time Gainsborough moved there Ipswich was hardly more than another small sleepy Suffolk town, but he made some friends there and met his first biographer, Philip Thicknesse. Thicknesse was an odd-tempered person, not without some military desire for quarrels; his memoir of Gainsborough is more than a little biased by his sense of his own importance: Thicknesse discovered Gainsborough, we read, and Thicknesse was the chief promoter of his future fame. However, he knew Gainsborough and not even his delusions of importance can take away the tang of authenticity from that knowledge.

Thicknesse was one day struck by what he thought

was a man's head and shoulders leaning over a garden wall. On approaching he saw this was only a piece of board cunningly painted; it had in fact been set up by Gainsborough to deceive people. Thicknesse decided to go and see what sort of a painter the artist was. He went to the house and there in a studio full of portraits and landscapes he met Gainsborough. 'Upwards of thirty-five years,' he was to write that he had known the artist; but in later years quarrels intervened and their intimacy ceased.

Another Ipswich friend was Joshua Kirby, a painter of pictures and of houses, a bit of a dealer in prints, and a man of the highest moral standards: he was admitted, dubious privilege, to the local clerical club. It was next to Kirby that Gainsborough asked to be buried in the churchyard at Kew.

Ipswich was not always dull. Occasionally there were exhibitions—even some fine paintings 'done by the celebrated Raphael' and there were numerous concerts. Gainsborough, who was not particularly interested in literature, was passionate about music. Many of his friends were musicians and in his portraits of them he establishes a sympathy that he hardly achieved elsewhere—unless in his portraits of dogs. More than this, there is an affinity with music in many of his pictures, and with the music of his own century: Mozart's above all.

In his Ipswich days Gainsborough's pictures were still strongly realistic. This gift, which never deserted him, was an income in itself since likenesses were what his patrons, squires and their ladies, really

required. He painted small pictures with the figures often full length, a little awkwardly posed: the lady seated, her husband standing, perhaps, clasping his gun, both stolidly looking out at the spectator. And behind would be a strip of Suffolk country, a field of plough or the sheaves of stooked corn. From the first, painting faces irked Gainsborough when he had no sympathy with the sitter; but it brought him money and he did not have to flatter. In fact his pictures of country gentry with their plain clothes and plainer faces have come to possess more charm than some of the later society portraits, rouged and over-elegant, which fashion forced him to produce.

Yet it was clear that Ipswich could not content him long. According to his friend Thicknesse it was at his suggestion that Gainsborough moved to Bath; this is probably quite true, for Thicknesse had taken a house there himself in 1759. In the October of that year there was an advertisement in the *Ipswich Journal* of a sale of 'All the Household Goods of Mr. Gainsborough, with some Pictures and original Drawings in the Landskip way'. Ipswich was behind him. A new city and new patrons awaited him.

Bath itself, and all it meant to eighteenth-century culture, was almost the creation of one man: Beau Nash. He died some fifteen months after Gainsborough moved to Bath and his epitaph speaks of the city as his kingdom which he ruled for more than fifty years. Under his rule—for it was really no less—the city had become a place of civilized pleasure: everyone went to Bath, even if they professed to

find it too fashionable or too frivolous. The city built the graceful arcs of its stucco terraces which we can still see to-day, which we can people with the gamblers, the beaux, the aristocracy who once stepped along those ordered streets.

Here Gainsborough took a house and presumably replaced all the household objects sold at the time of his Ipswich departure. His address was, rather splendidly, 'Mr. Gainsborough, Bath'; it was an age for reckless directions on envelopes and Gainsborough in writing to his friend the great actor used to put: 'David Garrick Esq., London' as the sole address.

Before Beau Nash died Gainsborough had already established himself as a practising portrait painter at Bath. He produced considerably more elaborate full-lengths than before and revealed quite clearly—for perhaps the first time as far as his century was concerned—his genius. The unconventional ease of his portraits was considered nearly shocking; the lively humanity he gave to his sitters was 'bold'. Mrs. Delany, a great gossip of the day, went to see the portrait of Thicknesse's fiancée, a Miss Ford who was his third wife, and wrote off to a friend, 'I should be very sorry to have anyone I loved set forth in such a manner.' The words are a reminder that even those artists who seem to us so much part of their period were, in that very period, often despised, misunderstood, or neglected.

Gainsborough was at least not neglected. Lists of his sitters in the years at Bath include the famous and the aristocratic, and he was encouraged to send a

picture or two to London for exhibition. In 1762 his picture, sent to the Society of Artists, was noticed in a newspaper as a 'good portrait' and the dog which accompanied the sitter was 'well done'. The sitter was a Mr. Poyntz and his dog was 'Amber'—just then enjoying some fame. When Mr. Poyntz had stayed at an inn at Midhurst 'Amber' had loyally nosed out a burglar from under his master's bed.

At Bath Gainsborough met Garrick and the two soon became friends. In their high spirits they had much in common; of Garrick Dr. Johnson said that you never knew to-day what he would do to-morrow, all depended on his humour. The same is true of Gainsborough and his behaviour was often considered as unconventional as were his paintings. Both men were not afraid to be witty, nor afraid to express irritation. Their age was not a very spontaneous one and its prim qualities are blown away by the lively conversations of Gainsborough and Garrick—some of which are fortunately recaptured by their letters.

Landscapes had not ceased to interest Gainsborough, busy as he was with portraits. He would make excursions around Bath, looking at the cottages and the children and all that was then summed up in the insipid phrase 'rural life'. That these scenes interested him—in fact moved him very much—is another sign of his uniqueness in his period. But he had even then ideas of his own about re-arranging Nature, introducing often pairs of lovers in elaborate garden surroundings. Another friend at Bath, a



clergyman and a sort of poet, brought out some lines in praise of this latest style where 'each fond couple treads the flowery lawn'.

A 'Landskip and Figures' was among the pictures Gainsborough sent up to London in 1767 for another annual exhibition. With it went three portraits. Horace Walpole, gossip and letter-writer, went to see the pictures and was able to admire the landscape, the figures, and some horses which Gainsborough had included.

The same spring Gainsborough was engaged in a misunderstanding with a most minor poet, a certain Underwood, who believed that Gainsborough had offered to paint his portrait free of charge. The poet began by mediocre yet friendly rhymes, promising to descend on Bath and allow the painter a sitting. He descended, was disabused, and retreated in dudgeon to Wales. After brooding some time, he returned to Bath and commenced rhyming complaints of Gainsborough; he also announced, but never seems to have published, his epistle to 'Thomas Gainsborough, Painter'. What Gainsborough thought of the whole affair he wrote succinctly in the postscript of a letter to Garrick: 'Damn Underwood!'

As well as enjoying the damp squibs of such local scandals, Bath also enjoyed music. Gainsborough had numerous opportunities to go to concerts and at one of them he met three of the Linley family: the father was famous for his performances of Handel, Elizabeth his daughter was a beautiful and talented singer, and the young Tommy was later to study with the boy

Mozart in Florence. It was inevitable that Gainsborough should be drawn to paint Miss Linley. In May 1768 he writes to a friend to say he cannot leave Bath as he has begun a large picture of Tommy Linley and his sister. 'I suppose you know,' he goes on, 'the Boy is bound for Italy the first opportunity.' Ten years later, back in England, the young Linley was killed in a boating accident; Mozart considered that his premature death alone prevented him becoming 'one of the great ornaments of the musical world'. Miss Linley was later wooed by Sheridan who escorted her to a convent in France, having secretly married her; he returned to England, fought two duels and the next year was reconciled to her father and, once again, married to her.

At the end of 1768 Gainsborough sent in his resignation to the Society of Artists where he had for some time been exhibiting. At about the same time George III signed a document which brought into existence a new body of artists: the Royal Academy. The two events were inter-connected, for Gainsborough had already received an invitation from Joshua Reynolds, its President, to become one of the first thirty-six members of this new body. And he had accepted.

The King's patronage of the Academy extended a good deal further than the loan of an adjective; he supported the venture with money and even had some authority over the Academy (in 1791 he caused Sir Thomas Lawrence to be elected an extra Associate). Music was his real passion but he was not

insensitive to painting: he is among the few English monarchs who have willingly patronized a good painter and he was fortunate enough to have Gainsborough. Although he did not care much for Reynolds he recognized his status as President of the Academy by knighting him.

The Royal Academy held an exhibition in the spring following its foundation and Gainsborough contributed. A custom had already arisen that members on election should present a picture to the Academy as part of its permanent Collection. For some reason Gainsborough presented nothing and it was only after his death that one of his daughters gave a landscape and also a self-portrait, both still at Burlington House.

It was not long before the innate rivalry between Gainsborough and the President, now Sir Joshua Reynolds, became apparent to visitors at the Royal Academy exhibitions. Sir Joshua had been settled in London a good many years and had an extremely prosperous practice as a portrait painter. In fact the years of his greatest activity, and perhaps his best pictures, were already over when the Academy was founded. Gainsborough was far from unknown at Bath and his portraits were being remarked in London; yet he had not so far returned to the capital where he had trained as a boy. By 1771 it was being said that he was the best portrait painter *after* Reynolds; here was high praise, but still Gainsborough remained at Bath.

That year his daughter Mary was ill of a 'delirious

fever'. It seems that she had some attack of the mental illness that came on totally at the end of her life. One Bath doctor believed in 1771 that she would never recover and gave his opinion that it was a family complaint. Gainsborough himself was sometimes considered to be near insanity—but such remarks about great artists are one of the consolations society indulges itself in. It is quite likely that Gainsborough had detected in his daughters some unsuitability for the ordinary cares of a domestic life and probably he did not expect either of them to marry. He taught them both to paint—which would be considered very odd no doubt at the time.

The next year, when the Academy exhibition came round, the newspapers had taken Reynolds' side against Gainsborough, condemning especially the colouring in Gainsborough's portraits. His ability to get a likeness was still being praised and this might be some consolation, since Reynolds had extreme difficulty with many of his portraits—it was a wonder he dared send some of them home, a contemporary remarked, they were so little like their sitters. What was now objected to in Gainsborough's men was a certain purplish floridity in the face: one nobleman remarkable for the sobriety of his life was said to have been maligned by Gainsborough so badly that posterity would believe him a drunken dog. Cynical remarks were also passed on the women's complexions in his pictures: that they appeared rather more brilliant than natural. The general fashion for making up resulted in such artificial complexions—which sati-

rists delighted in condemning—and perhaps Gainsborough painted no more than what he saw.

As well as suffering newspaper criticisms, Gainsborough seems to have been involved this year in a quarrel with the Academy. The result was that he abstained from sending any pictures for four years. It is likely that the quarrel arose over his portrait of Countess Waldegrave, sent for exhibition in 1772 but apparently withdrawn by the Council of the Academy. Countess Waldegrave had long been secretly married to the King's brother and this had caused anger at Court; it was probably considered tactful to keep her portrait out of sight of the King and Queen as patrons of the Academy. The diplomatic proposal may well have come from Reynolds; if so Gainsborough may equally well have supposed Reynolds was jealous.

Whatever he thought he seems to have been more angry than depressed. It was not very long before he took the final step in his career: a move from Bath to London. In the early summer of 1774 Gainsborough reached the capital where at the Academy that year Reynolds had such an array of pictures as might challenge any rival.

The actual reason why Gainsborough left Bath at that particular moment is not clear. The irascible and egocentric Thicknesse said that his departure was occasioned by a quarrel between them, but this can hardly be so. Patronage may well have been declining at Bath while the attractive promise of London was constant. Once arrived, Gainsborough took the

tenancy of part of Schomberg House in Pall Mall and this remained his studio and home for the rest of his life.

Now that the step was taken Gainsborough may have doubted its wisdom. He had hardly reached London before his old Ipswich friend Joshua Kirby, who had himself moved earlier to London, died. Of his fellow Academicians Gainsborough knew few, if any; nor would he be popular with them. He was elected to the Academy Council but he never attended.

Still he had friends in London, chiefly among musicians and theatrical personalities. The youngest son of the great composer Bach, John Christian, was also a composer and a friend of Gainsborough who painted his portrait. Bach is said to have given Gainsborough's own performances at the harpsichord ironic applause and to have usually finished by pushing the painter from the stool and taking his place. Close to Schomberg House were the auction rooms of Mr. Christie who disposed of pictures; Gainsborough made friends with him and, accompanied by Garrick, often appeared in the sale room. Their presence was said to add fifteen per cent. to Mr. Christie's commission on each picture sold.

Gradually sitters began to arrive at the studio in Pall Mall and there was no longer need for Gainsborough to be worried about his finances. Yet he was not altogether happy. Money meant little to him at any time, and honours less. In a letter to his sister who had remained at Bath he says of religious sects: 'It does not signify what [you are] if you are but

free from hypocrisy and don't set your heart upon worldly honours and wealth.'

Now that prosperity was assured—or seemed so—Gainsborough seems to have felt an emptiness in all the aspects of his life that lay outside his art. 'I have built upon sandy foundations all my life long,' he tells his sister in another letter. 'I could now enter into particulars as my heart finds itself affected, but what would it all signify? If I tell you my wife is weak but good, and never much formed to humour my happiness, what can you do to alter her? If I complain that Peggy is a sensible good girl, but insolent and proud in her behaviour to me at times, can you make your arm long enough to box her ears for me while you live at Bath?'

This letter was written on Boxing Day 1775 and Gainsborough goes on to say that he had just discovered a secret love affair between Mary Gainsborough (Molly) and a Mr. Fischer. This is the only time a suitor is mentioned in connection with either girl, nor is there any mention of them in society at Bath or at London. Fischer was a talented oboe-player who apparently courted both Gainsborough sisters. No doubt for this reason Gainsborough disliked him very much, and was distressed by the sudden announcement later that Molly was going to marry him. The news distressed Margaret even more. Nor was the marriage a success; the couple soon separated and Molly returned to her parents' house in Pall Mall.

Gainsborough's absence from showing at the

Academy had been deplored in more than one newspaper and by 1777 he seems to have decided to send in his pictures again. He was now assured of the support of one newspaper at least: the *Morning Post*. The editor of this was the Reverend Bate Dudley, known as the 'Fighting Parson', a clergyman as handy with his fists as with words, not afraid of a fight either in person or in print. Bate was a friend of Garrick and perhaps through him had met Gainsborough. His friendship for Gainsborough made his paper a stout partisan of the painter, and after Gainsborough's death Bate wrote a memoir which is full of intimate knowledge of his friend.

In his notice of the 1777 Academy Bate declared his allegiance straight away. He headed his article: *Thomas Gainsborough, R.A.* and explained that this distinction indicated Gainsborough's position above the rest of the artists under review. So partisan is Bate that it is surprising that he was also correct in his judgments—with the exception, possibly, of Reynolds. Bate was also partisan in his criticisms of the way the Academy had hung Gainsborough's pictures; this difficult question of hanging was to lead to Gainsborough's final rupture with the Academy. It was customary for full length portraits to be hung very high indeed, the base of the frame being about eight feet from the ground; at such a height many of Gainsborough's 'tender effects' were naturally lost. The walls of the Academy were crowded with paintings, positively papered with them; and Gainsborough was reluctant to force his



effects, so that amid the crowd his paintings often showed to disadvantage—and for this he inclined to blame the Hanging Committee.

As for rivalry with Reynolds, his re-appearance at the Academy (where that year Sir Joshua had thirteen pictures) confirmed it. It was recognized that in portraiture Gainsborough seriously challenged Reynolds, while also excelling in landscape, which Reynolds never attempted. Yet within the term portraiture Reynolds was capable of many variations: from heavy classical groups in heavy classical drapery to tender pictures of mothers with children; grand and impressive soldiers and seamen to Van Dyck-costumed young aristocrats mooning in the grounds of their country houses. A further extension of his subject matter was historical painting which he took up in an unhappy attempt to rival the old Masters. His range was acknowledged by Gainsborough in a characteristic comment before some of Reynolds' pictures: 'Damn him, how various he is!'

Gainsborough himself was far from incapable of variety. But he was not at all attracted to painting historical pictures and disliked his sitters appearing in fancy costumes. Between his landscapes and his portraits it was difficult to judge; both, as the eighteenth century put it, merited attention and praise. The portraits he was now sending to the Academy included some popular courtesans of the day; the papers were delighted to recognize ladies whose real faces, they said, had not been seen by the world for many a year. Some of these pictures were

criticized for their lack of finish and the sketchy quality of Gainsborough's portraits resulted in them being called 'daubs'. They retained their air of French elegance, however, and the notoriety and the beauty of the sitters attracted plenty of public notice.

Meanwhile Bate's editorship of the *Morning Post* was drawing to a stormy conclusion. The libels that appeared in the paper had proved too strong even for the period and Bate founded a new newspaper: the *Morning Herald*. His own full length portrait was painted by Gainsborough and in this he appears a charming figure, unobtrusively dressed, with a dog beside him; nothing could well be further from the pugnacious and libellous editor one imagines, yet the portrait was hailed as, and no doubt was, a 'perfect resemblance'. In the *Morning Herald* Bate had now space to devote to Gainsborough and his notice of the 1780 Academy exhibition was able to commend the portraits of Gainsborough's two latest and most distinguished sitters, the King and Queen. The two pictures, which hang to-day in the Queen's drawing-room at Windsor, were only the beginning of royal patronage of Gainsborough. In the full length of Queen Charlotte, a wonderful lyricism flickers over the gold and white gauze skirt, a freshness which rebukes the heavy folds of material—like nightgowns—that envelop the sitters of so many Reynolds portraits. Other royal commissions followed and by the summer of 1781 Gainsborough was unofficial Court painter; the newspapers remarked that his fame was quite established at Buckingham House (i.e.

Palace). Not only the King, but the Prince of Wales now wanted to be painted; in the autumn of 1781 he came for a number of sittings to Schomberg House.

His portrait was to be shown at the Academy of 1782 and along with it the portrait by Gainsborough of the Prince's discarded mistress, Perdita Robinson; it was while playing in 'A Winter's Tale' that she had caught the eye of the royal profligate (later George IV) and received her name Perdita. Also destined for the Academy of 1782 was Reynolds' portrait of her—said to be the best thing he had yet painted. Before the exhibition opened Gainsborough's portrait of her was being criticized as a poor likeness and finally it was not entered for the Academy at all. Three years later it was sold at a time of Mrs. Robinson's financial embarrassment and seems to have passed into the collection of her one-time lover, the Prince of Wales. The picture is now in the Wallace Collection, London.

Less conventional sitters, who provided Gainsborough with his great success of 1782, were some pigs which had been allowed into his studio and which appeared with a girl, entitled not unsuitably: *Girl with Pigs*. The purchaser of this turned out to be Reynolds himself who thought the picture the best Gainsborough ever painted. He sent a hundred guineas and half as many elegant compliments to the painter and received a letter of thanks in which Gainsborough expressed satisfaction at having 'brought my pigs to a fine market'.

This interchange of letters was probably the

beginning of a plan whereby Reynolds should sit to Gainsborough—and perhaps vice versa. Reynolds certainly did sit for his portrait but the sittings were interrupted by his paralytic stroke, and they were not resumed. It is possible, as some gossips declared, that Reynolds never had any intention of painting Gainsborough; whether or not he intended to, he did not, and the two painters were never in contact again until too late.

In the summer after the success of his 'Pigs' Gainsborough was down at Windsor with the task of painting no less than fifteen members of the Royal Family; these portraits were all identical in size and were no more than bust length. The problem of providing interest in such a commission was really insoluble and Gainsborough's wish to have the portraits hung together at the Academy in three rows of five only emphasized this difficulty. However, he addressed the Academy as to his wishes in a way that left little room for doubt, sending a drawing of the arrangement he desired; while the Academy Council received the following letter:

Mr. Gainsborough presents his compliments to the Gentlemen appointed to hang the pictures at the Royal Academy; and begs leave to *hint* to them that if the Royal Family, which he has sent for this Exhibition (*being smaller than three-quarters*) are hung above the line with full-lengths, he never more, whilst he breathes, will send another picture to the Exhibition.—This he swears by God.

The 'hint' was taken and Gainsborough's wishes fulfilled. The result may have pleased the painter but it pleased hardly anyone else. The arrangement was stigmatized as a childish conceit, and the highest praise of the likenesses was that Gainsborough had extricated himself from a delicate position very well.

Whether or not Gainsborough enjoyed his position as unofficial painter to the King, his popularity with the Royal Family had to be accepted. The following year the King again sat. Then a group of the three eldest Princesses which had been begun somewhat earlier was completed and ready for the exhibition, along with seventeen other pictures. This had been commissioned, in a fraternal moment, by the Prince of Wales for a room at Carlton House. It had been planned for a certain height there, to be set into the panelling. When Gainsborough sent it to the Academy he stipulated that the picture must not be hung higher than five foot or so from the ground. This time the Academy were unable to humour the painter; they 'respectfully' pointed out that they could not hang the picture as he wished. He thereupon withdrew all his pictures and never exhibited at the Academy again.

By his action Gainsborough was left without any place to exhibit his pictures except Schomberg House. He now began to prepare an exhibition there and opened it to the public in the summer of 1784. But the season was ended and fashionable people had left London; of the newspaper critics only Bate came. His notice in the *Morning Herald* was long, detailed,

and owed much of its tone no doubt to what Gainsborough had told him. The gallery was probably not altogether a failure, even in its first year, and it remained in existence for the rest of the painter's life.

The same summer the post of Portrait Painter to the King became vacant on the death of Allan Ramsay. Bate wrote an article on Gainsborough's suitability for the post, and in fact Gainsborough must have thought his chances were good. Nevertheless, when the announcement was made, Reynolds was appointed, perhaps because of his position as President of the Royal Academy. The act must have been one of royal impartiality, since George III disliked Reynolds and, of course, patronized Gainsborough. In worldly honour Reynolds had surpassed his rival.

The next year's Academy was the more eagerly awaited as everyone was anxious to see if Gainsborough would relent and contribute. Some of the papers did not even bother to prophesy; they assured their public that Gainsborough was not holding aloof and listed the pictures he had submitted. But they were wrong. On some sides Gainsborough's absence was deplored; on others it was said to be of little consequence.

While the papers discussed the point the painter went on working. In these years, his last as it proved, Gainsborough was occupied not so much with portraits—though he continued to paint them—but with a new style of picture; 'fancy pictures' Reynolds called them later. They were usually rustic scenes with a child or two, or a group of peasants: a

girl at a brook, her dog under one arm, painted not so much realistically as elegantly. The trees were elegant too, feathery-foliaged, grouped in an artistic shade; even the cows and pigs and dogs shared the general air of Arcadian elegance. Romantic as these scenes were in contrast with the earthy force of Gainsborough's early work, they were very popular. The *Girl with Pigs* which Reynolds had bought was this type of picture.

An airy elegance had entered into Gainsborough's portraits too. When in 1786 Mr. and Mrs. Hallett, a newly married young couple, sat for their picture Gainsborough produced the *Morning Walk* now in the National Gallery, London. The couple stroll leisurely under trees whose leaves are as silken as Mrs. Hallett's dress, and accompanying them, equally poised and delicately-bred, is a silky-coated dog.

That autumn Gainsborough held another exhibition at his gallery and had ready a number of full-length portraits, including one of Miss Linley, now Mrs. Sheridan. Her beauty and elegance had always appealed to him and now seems almost to have become an obsession; it has been noted that his female peasants in their rustic settings begin to resemble Mrs. Sheridan more and more, thus resembling peasants less and less.

He amused himself by painting his landscapes from small models of scenery he had assembled with twigs and moss; his woods were no more than a pile of broccoli and pebbles formed his rocks. He had also a 'show box': this was built to receive pictures painted

on glass and lit from behind by candles—like a miniature theatre. Although Gainsborough went on a tour to the Lake District and was again down at Bath for a brief stay, he was pursuing the landscapes not of fact but of his own imagining.

In this vein he had embarked upon a 'fancy picture', the *Woodman*. He himself believed it to be his best work and Bate had a paragraph about it in his paper; the original was a poor smith worn out by labour, painted by Gainsborough as a woodman with his dog sheltering from a violent storm. The subject seems already a foretaste of the subjects Wordsworth was to choose for his poems. However romantically, Gainsborough turns his attention to a whole class of person—the poor in fact—who had noticeably been absent from the pictures of anyone since Hogarth died.

Early in 1788 Gainsborough had to take his *Woodman* to the King who had expressed his interest. The picture received the royal commendation, but was not purchased.

London was now pre-occupied with the sensation of the trial of Warren Hastings. An eighteenth century trial had much the same glamour as a good play, except that the speeches were longer than could ever be tolerated upon the stage. Sheridan, playwright turned politician, was among the most eagerly listened to; a good seat in Westminster Hall was sought at fifty guineas on such an occasion. The Hall was, like many public buildings, cold and draughty; on the opening day of the trial its atmosphere had



chilled the Prince of Wales into retirement at a coffee house.

Gainsborough was among those who crowded to the trial; no one suffered more than he for his attendance. He caught cold in the back of the neck, probably towards the end of April. It seems that he suspected from the first that his illness was serious, and on 5 May he signed his will. He grew a little better; he even painted a small landscape. But his mind was turning back to ponder on his life, rather as drowning men are said to recollect their lifetimes at the moment of death. 'It's odd,' he wrote to a friend that May, 'how all the childish opinions hang about one in sickness. I feel such a fondness for my first imitations of little Dutch landscapes. . . .'

That affection for some phase of his work seems part of the artist's agony in leaving the world. Three years later when Mozart lay dying, his friends gathered to sing for him parts of his own Requiem; and at that music he burst into tears.

The summer of 1788 was exceptionally hot. By June Horace Walpole was saying that everyone was burnt to the bone. At Schomberg House Gainsborough was dying, and he knew it. To a friend who visited him he talked about his life and how people might judge him. 'They must take me altogether—liberal, thoughtless, and dissipated.' The newspapers were now silent. It was known that cancer had attacked Gainsborough. The London Season was finishing; once again all the fashionable were leaving town.

It was now that Gainsborough longed to see his

rival Reynolds, that they should have one more conversation. He sent him the following letter:

Dear Sir Joshua,—I am just now to write what I fear you will not read—after lying in a dying state for 6 months. The extreme affection which I am informed of by a friend which Sir Joshua has expressed induces me to beg a last favour, which is to come once under my Roof and look at my things, my Woodman you never saw, if what I ask is not disagreeable to your feeling that I may have the honour to speak to you. I can from a sincere Heart say that I always admired and sincerely loved Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Tho. Gainsborough.

Gainsborough had not been dying for six months; he had lost all count of time in the weary solitude of illness and in the original letter his pen has hesitated at the figure '6' uncertainly.

Reynolds came. The rivals had one last interview. It was then, according to later gossip, that Gainsborough said: 'We are all going to Heaven, and Vandyke is of the company.' But one of Gainsborough's daughters said only that as he lay dying she heard him mutter the word 'Vandyke'. On 2 August Gainsborough died.

The weather had broken. Horace Walpole, who had retired from the centre of London, welcomed the rain.

In December Reynolds gave his annual discourse to

the students at the Royal Academy. That year he chose to speak, for the first and only time, of a contemporary: Gainsborough. He mentioned their last interview; he traced Gainsborough's career and praised the artist who would be among the first rank if the English school of painters ever took its place in history.

The next spring Gainsborough's gallery in Pall Mall opened for one final exhibition—at which everything was for sale. The exhibition was popular; Queen Charlotte came to visit it; but the pictures hardly sold. Mrs. Gainsborough, helped by her nephew Gainsborough Dupont (who had been assistant to her husband) was left with the bulk of the pictures and drawings. Three years later Mr. Christie, the auctioneer, came and conducted a sale to dispose of them.

Then Schomberg House was relinquished. Mrs. Gainsborough and her daughters moved to Sloane Street, taking with them sketch books, engravings, paintings, of Gainsborough's. There in 1798 Mrs. Gainsborough died. Her two daughters lived on, selling their father's books, his musical instruments, quite rich but totally eccentric. They retired to Acton, then a village. Their eccentricity increased and in Mary's case passed into madness. Margaret died in 1820. Mary, long deluded into thinking herself Royalty, died at last in 1826.

Gainsborough died a tolerably rich man: by that standard he may be supposed to have had a successful

life. Certainly his optimism and gaiety made most of his life a happy one. He was not afraid of enjoying himself; one of his daughters confessed that some days he was so overcome by the previous night's conviviality that he could not paint at all.

His art was not, however, an appendage to his life, nor did he sacrifice it to other considerations. He loved his art above all, as Reynolds proclaimed nobly in his elegiac discourse on Gainsborough; in that love the two rivals were united. And Gainsborough's capacity to enjoy life came from his ability to be moved by it; he reacted to things often with a simplicity that was startling to that staid society. His letters show the thought running ahead of the words, so that once when addressing a noble patron and finding himself getting the sentence muddled he wrote, 'I am but a wild goose at best.'

This almost accidental verdict suggests something of Gainsborough's own sense of being an oddity; and in Society the artist is always the odd man.

Gainsborough is an oddity also in English painting. He had a freedom and lyricism which marked him off from the first, but which grew even greater and more spontaneous. It is typical that he is one of the few good English painters to have left us a collection of wonderful drawings. Reynolds, it may be noted, has left hardly any drawings at all; nor could he draw well.

But Gainsborough's response to life was so much more varied. Indeed, it would have been logical if Reynolds had damned *him* for *his* variety. In his

Suffolk days Gainsborough responded most to just what he saw, whether in landscape or in people. He painted in a way to suit this calm reality, with careful brush strokes, like a Dutch 'little master'; these early pictures are among the most vivid reminders of mid-eighteenth-century England's pastoral air. *Mr. Plampin* in the National Gallery, London, is a pleasant-faced, placid man, at ease in English countryside, tinged by no romance—as solidly present as neat application of paint can make him.

The move to Bath inaugurated a new phase in Gainsborough which shows itself at its simplest in larger canvases. He began to visit country houses and see the landscapes of Rubens and the portraits of Van Dyck: to both painters he paid a debt of influence. He composed his landscapes more grandly—often calling them in fact no more than 'A Grand Landscape'—and his portraits were now becoming nearly life-size full-lengths, with the sitters occasionally clad in Van Dyck costume. The elegance of Van Dyck's Cavaliers appealed to his own love of elegance; the difficulty was to invest sitters of a less flamboyant age with any of that air.

In London about the same time Reynolds was having equal difficulty in trying to make his sitters look noble, dignified, and people of dominant personality. Admiring Michelangelo, he wanted to mould his persons as superhumanly. When Lady Sarah Bunbury sat to him he was seized by the unhappy idea of showing her, classically draped, sacrificing to the Graces. This drew from Mrs. Piozzi, a friend of

Dr. Johnson's, a comment worthy of Johnson in its devastating common sense. Lady Sarah, she said, never *did* sacrifice to the Graces.

In fact the English nobleman of the eighteenth century, and his wife, in their extreme anxiety to be painted nearly exhausted the ingenuity of the two great artists. What they did to the lesser painters, sucked dry by the inexorable demand for 'faces', hangs as a gloomy lesson in most English country houses: row upon row of insipid portraits.

For Gainsborough and Reynolds the dilemma was solved by an unspoken agreement to divide: Reynolds faced the implications of the British man; Gainsborough lent his grace and lyrical elegance to the British woman. But the portrait was chiefly Gainsborough's means of life; there is a story that the term 'pot boiler' originates with his remark that he only painted portraits 'to make the pot boil'.

The truth is that Gainsborough was the first English romantic painter. After his arrival in London he discovered a last vein of his own genius, a departure from faces and from landscapes: the fancy pictures. Here he could capture whatever fleeting effects pleased him: twilight or storm amid a countryside of imagination that he had conjured up from the pebbles and moss of his miniature landscapes. And this could be peopled by figures he had seen in the street, or on walks: beggar children and peasants—poor yet beautiful. One such child he had wanted to adopt but its mother decided in the end to keep it, for it earned her some seven shillings a day by begging. In his

fancy pictures Gainsborough found a release from the pressure of his period. It is hardly necessary to rebut a charge of escapism; but if he escaped it was after forty years' hard labour. He had earned his place as landscape painter and as portrait painter. Now he sought to express a more private world, tender, exquisite, melancholy. He had only started to sketch that world when he died.

The change in Gainsborough's subject matter was paralleled by changes in his technique: actual handling of paint is part of the artist's sensitivity and Gainsborough has been rewarded for those delicate effects which he refused to touch up for the Royal Academy. In time his handling became looser and more fluid; he began to float the paint on to the canvas as if it were wash upon a drawing. Instead of the early careful application of the pigment he now applied it in strokes and dabs, using brushes as long as six foot. The tones of paint were quiet, muted; to achieve shadowy effects in his pictures he would artificially darken his studio before painting. That many of these habits did not result in just washy shapeless compositions is due to his genius for drawing: his use of line created a crispness in the midst of fuzz. Even Reynolds, who disapproved of this 'scratchy' technique, had to admit that viewed from a certain distance Gainsborough's pictures were seen to be finished. Reynolds himself abused the medium of oil paint by dangerous devices for dramatic effects: to-day many of his pictures are irretrievably spoiled. When Gainsborough's are cleaned, like the Windsor *Queen Charlotte*, the full

subtlety of his colour emerges unharmed. It is a sign of their different attitudes that while Reynolds had drapery painters for the costume in nearly all his portraits, Gainsborough enjoyed painting the drapery himself and never employed anyone except, late in life, his nephew Dupont.

It is sometimes said that Gainsborough is apart from the main stream of British painting; so much the worse for the main stream. In fact his two abilities were never to be united again. After him the landscape of England found two great delineators in Turner and Constable (both uninterested in figure painting); while the portrait reached a last romantic peak in Lawrence (we have only two landscapes by him). Of these men, Constable at least did not forget his Suffolk predecessor; before Gainsborough's landscapes he said—and we can widen the tribute by including all of Gainsborough's best pictures—'we find tears in our eyes and know not what brings them'.

*"We find tears in our eyes  
and know not what brings  
them."*



## VI

### *VAN GOGH*

VINCENT VAN GOGH was born at Groot-Zundert in Holland on 30 March 1853. His father was the Protestant pastor there, a position modest and obscure, in the province of Brabant, a countryside bleak, damp and lonely. Earnest rather than inspired, Théodore Van Gogh had after ordination received this small post in the village of Zundert; he married in 1851 a native of The Hague, Anna-Cornelia Carventus; in March 1852 their first child, Vincent, was born, but died six weeks later.

The next year Van Gogh was born, and christened in memory of the first Vincent, himself named in honour of the pastor's father and brother. Vincent was a traditional name in the family; an ancestor in the eighteenth century had been called Vincent and had served in the King's Swiss Guard at Paris. Although Théodore Van Gogh was occupying a humble living in an isolated district, the Van Gogh family had held many positions of importance at earlier times, while Théodore's father was pastor at Breda and an eminent man of the city. Of Théodore's brothers, one was in the navy and had already risen to vice-admiral; the three others were all art dealers, one of whom, Vincent, had a large gallery at The Hague.

After Van Gogh other children were born: a daughter Anna; in 1857 Théodore, known in the family as Théo; then two more girls, and finally the last child, Cornelius. Van Gogh, from the first, was apart from the other children. He preferred to be alone, wandering along the bank of a nearby stream or in the fields, collecting insects whose Latin names he inscribed on the boxes that contained them. His brothers and sisters dared not follow him on these expeditions, nor ask to be included.

From his mother Van Gogh inherited his appearance, and much of his temperament. Her family history included in fact, not only a bishop, but also a sister who suffered from epilepsy; she herself was liable to fits of anger, by turns tender and brusque, and with some urge towards writing. Like his mother Van Gogh had bursts of rage which he could not control. When he was sent to school his temper found new irritants in the discipline and in his school fellows. After a period, the pastor had to withdraw him.

But Van Gogh was already more than an uncouth and ill-tempered boy. As much as his mother, he was capable of tenderness; he drew a great deal, and would offer his drawings to such friends as he had at school; he would suddenly choose as companion his younger brother Théo, and take him on long walks and on fishing expeditions. In Théo he had a pupil; he showed him the reality of the countryside around Zundert: the trees, insects, grasses; and when they went fishing Théo was amazed to find his brother sad

over the fate of the fish. Back in the rectory he drew, not only what he saw in the world about him, but copies of famous pictures which he had somehow seen in reproduction. And when not drawing he passed his time reading.

At twelve Van Gogh went off to a boarding school not far from home, at Zevenbergen. There, it was thought, he would learn more sociable ways and a more agreeable manner. He passed four years at the school in Zevenbergen, returning to the rectory only at holiday times. He grew up; but he did not alter. On returning at the end of term he still wandered, alone or with Théo, in the desolate countryside; when checked he was still liable to fits of anger; he disliked walking in the village where people stared at him inquisitively. While he remained as silently withdrawn as before, his parents debated anxiously about his future. It was clear that he was different from other children with a difference both attractive and frightening.

He seemed to have no wish to do anything in life, yet he could not be accused of lack of seriousness. Once or twice he had visited the home of his uncle Vincent, who had sold his art gallery at The Hague to the large and famous firm of Goupil, and seen the pictures which furnished that house. He had seen and studied the pictures, but never spoken of them to his family. Now, when he was sixteen, his uncle came forward and proposed a career in picture dealing: Van Gogh could go to The Hague and enter the branch of Goupil which his uncle had sold.

A letter of recommendation was sent to the manager of the gallery. Van Gogh arrived. From the manager letters returned to the rectory at Zundert saying what a model employee he was proving; he was conscientious and punctual, had an excellent memory for engravings, pictures, drawings, in stock at the gallery, and was going to make a successful career in the trade.

The firm soon recognized his ability by promotion. It had branches in more than one European capital, including London. Now he was no longer an apprentice but a member of the firm. He was given a post in London, and arrived in May 1873, just twenty years old.

The same year Théo also entered the Goupil firm, being sent to their branch in Brussels. The affinity between the two brothers, despite their very different characters, was now strong and Van Gogh had found a confidant to whom he could write of his first impressions in London. In the years that followed the brothers were usually separated; separation was bridged by the many letters Van Gogh sent Théo, and the survival of that correspondence has provided an insight into nearly every picture he painted and into most of the actions of the painter.

In London Van Gogh found a new city to explore, new museums, antique shops; there was the river, the Goupil gallery just off the Strand, and the crowds in the streets. As a boy he had read Dickens' novels, and London to him was still a Dickensian city. He was eager to adapt himself to share in that life; he

began by buying a top hat; he gingerly appraised English painting, and found Constable superb. The Dickensian virtues appealed to him above all: charity for the vast mass of the poor that London contained. He longed to be married to one of Dickens' heroines, to have some children, to be happy.

His first lodging was with a pair of old ladies who kept a too-loquacious parrot. The rather high cost, combined with the parrot's presence, decided him to move. He found a French widow, a Madame Loyer, who kept a kindergarten with her daughter, Ursula. There he lodged more than contentedly, for soon he was in love with Ursula, and it seemed that she returned his love. Everything seemed wonderful; he loved England, he went boating on the Thames, he studied London, and he wrote home to his family of his almost delirious happiness—without mentioning the chief cause of it.

The pastor Van Gogh had now been moved to another living, equally obscure, at Helvoirt. When Christmas came Van Gogh could not bear to return home and leave Ursula. Instead he sent drawings of his room in London, Madame Loyer's house, the street outside. Meanwhile he was happy in his love for Ursula Loyer, but he had yet to say anything to her beyond the banalities of commonplace flirtation. He had stayed near her at Christmas; but when the summer came, and fresh holidays, he had to return home. He summoned courage to speak to her before he left in July. He proposed marriage. She explained that she was already engaged, to the man who had

occupied the lodgings before Van Gogh. When he asked her to break off that engagement she refused.

Instead of returning home in happiness he returned in despair. He was not yet experienced in being rejected; in fact Ursula Loyer's refusal to marry him marked the first stage in the vain struggle he underwent to find life tolerable. He dreaded loneliness, and was fated to remain alone. His parents attempted to help him during his holiday in Holland but he kept his room and passed the day smoking—a pleasure which in him amounted to a passion.

At the end of the period he returned to London. As a companion his sister Anna accompanied him and new lodgings were chosen. Van Gogh had however ceased to be a model employee at the Goupil gallery. In an effort of imaginative sympathy, the directors sent him to their branch in Paris when they learnt he was suffering from the results of a love affair. But he did not remain there; by the winter of 1874 he was in London again, vainly hoping that this time Ursula Loyer would accept him as her husband.

When at last it was clear that she would never accept him, he was ready to return to Paris. He arrived there again in May 1875, took a room in Montmartre and turned for consolation to the Bible.

The atmosphere of the Goupil gallery was more profane. The gallery naturally offered for sale fashionable paintings of the day, mediocre stuff which revolted Van Gogh and which he was too honest to want to foist upon the customers (even if they were not already eager to possess something bad but *chic*).

Soon Van Gogh's complaints were heard. The trade in works of art, he announced, was only a form of organized theft. This deepened the impression the directors had of him as a bad employee, against whom customers often complained (no doubt when diverted from making an idiotic purchase). Van Gogh could stand it no longer in December; he fled home—to yet another new home, this time at Etten where his father had recently been appointed pastor.

In January he went back to Paris. He asked one of the Goupil directors if it would be a good thing for him to remain with the firm for the rest of the year, supposing they had no serious complaints to make. The director replied that he was free to leave on 1 April, and could thank God for what he had learnt in the firm.

Van Gogh had no alternative but to leave; he had in fact been sacked. His uncle Vincent was furious at the end of the affair and professed no more interest in his nephew. Among the suggestions made for a future career, Théo suggested that Van Gogh take up painting. Van Gogh resisted the idea; he wanted a job in the world, to conquer his faults and win a place in it. He searched among the jobs available in England. On 16 April 1876 he arrived at Ramsgate where a certain Mr. Stokes, a clergyman, kept a school in which Van Gogh was to teach.

The school belonged in Dickens, as did Mr. Stokes and his twenty-four pale pupils who, wearing top hats, played mournful leap-frog on Sunday afternoons. The pupils were from poor homes, and Mr. Stokes

was poor too. The school moved to Isleworth, as part of a reorganization, and thence Van Gogh was sent into London to find the parents and collect some overdue fees from them. He descended into a hell of slums, going from house to shop and surprising the parents into producing money. The poverty he saw evoked his pity, and his charity. On his next visit for the same purpose his emotions dulled the object; he returned moved by the unhappiness and penury, and without the fees.

At Isleworth a Mr. Jones, a Methodist clergyman, agreed that he should become an assistant lay preacher and have an opportunity to return again to the slums. Van Gogh left Mr. Stokes. He began preaching in English, despite the difficulties; he studied for his sermons; in his spare hours, eating little and sustained by violent devotion, he haunted the churches of every sect, seeking only God.

By Christmas he was ill and exhausted. His real wish, to preach to the coal miners in England, had been frustrated, for he was still too young for that mission. So once more he returned home, a fanatical and austere Christian—almost too fanatical for the steady piety of his father. The pastor did not want his son to go back to England and, with the aid of Van Gogh's uncle Vincent, a job was found for him in a bookshop at Dordrecht. Van Gogh agreed to take the post; he had leisure to read the pious works he was anxious to read, without having to buy them. In Dordrecht he lived a solitary existence, hardly speaking to anyone, still feeling guilty about his



addiction to smoking. Occasionally he went to the museum, and he drew a little—but he was not yet eager to be a painter.

Instead, he thought he had discovered his vocation: to be a pastor as his father was, and his grandfather. He left Dordrecht, where he had been only some two months, in April 1877. It was decided that he should go to Amsterdam where he could study for the necessary preliminary examinations.

At Amsterdam he lodged with his uncle, the vice-admiral, but the relationship between them was distant. On the rare occasion of talk together they disagreed about beauty in art and in life: the vice-admiral was, like most service men, all for a beautiful body; Van Gogh was for a soul. He would prefer, he said, an ugly, old, poor, unhappy woman who had intelligence and a soul.

Meanwhile, depressed by his studies and perhaps more by a sense of still not having found a vocation, Van Gogh toiled on. He took precautions against suicide—already tempted to this way of escape from a world which constricted him. Some days he wrote feverishly to his parents by each post, the letters themselves scrawled in despair and barely legible. He wrote to Théo. The whole plan of study, of being one more well-educated clergyman, had become a nightmare.

He suddenly left Amsterdam in July 1878 and returned to the rectory at Etten. His friend of Isleworth days, Mr. Jones, travelled with him and his father to Brussels and there they saw a group of

evangelical clergymen. If these accepted him he could enter an evangelical college, where learning would be less in demand than devotion and ability to touch hearts by preaching.

He was accepted. By August he was at the Brussels college, a quiet retreat where soon his nervousness and desperate zeal made his superiors doubtful and himself exacerbated. The solitude only intensified his violence. His melancholy was relieved by the few sketches he allowed himself: what beauties there are in art, he wrote to Théo, if one can remember what one has seen; then one isn't ever bored, nor really isolated, nor ever alone.

He longed, when his training was over, to be able to go to the Borinage, a mining district in Belgium of hopeless poverty and unrelieved grimness. In that world of misery he perhaps believed he would be accepted and needed.

When the training did in fact end, the Committee refused to send Van Gogh out as a missionary. Nevertheless, he went, as he had planned, to the Borinage—under no auspices, with no credentials, to preach and to offer himself for the miners and their families. The country was more grey than black, people, houses, even the sky, veiled by coal dust; the mines were crowded by children and women as well as men, working for thirteen hours a day in airless galleries where blind horses dragged the trucks of coal.

Van Gogh was moved by this spectacle; he opened his campaign of preaching and soon won hearers. He taught the children and, as they had no toys, he gave

them drawings of his own. His success was reported back to Brussels. The Committee revoked their previous decision and appointed him to a mission in the Borinage, granting him a salary. At last his work had been approved. Almost in ecstasy he gave away his money, his clothes—he went about like a miner, even to the grime on his face—and preached in a room of the sad local saloon to such people as came. His life was given over to helping other people to live. Even a caterpillar was wonderful to him as part of life; when he found one fallen in a garden he put it back on a leaf for shelter.

Such humanity was no part of Belgian capitalism as it expressed its avaricious policy in the coal mines. Van Gogh himself descended a mine (not in those days visited by actresses and royalty); terrible as were the conditions he saw, and against which he protested in vain, they were aggravated in a nearby mine by an explosion. This disaster followed an epidemic of typhus, and was made the more pitiable by the absence of any first aid post—an item too expensive for the coal mine owners to provide. Van Gogh toiled among the wounded, cared for one man, whom the doctors had not bothered over as being likely to die, and restored him to health again.

His humanity was no more approved by established religion than by established capitalism. The Committee of evangelical clergymen at Brussels began to threaten him with loss of his mission if he continued to cause scandal (this being their definition of his charity). When the miners threatened to strike Van

Gogh did not rebuke them; he begged only that they should not use violence.

Then the news arrived that Van Gogh's mission had been withdrawn. The miners saw his departure with sadness, but remembered him with affection. In 1913 there were still old miners who were able to recall 'L' pasteur Vincent', and as late as 1939 some memory of his work lingered in the Borinage. But outwardly, in 1879, Van Gogh had failed once again. His humanity, charity, pity, had been assessed as scandalous and mad. He walked into the night, for he had no money—carrying his possessions in a handkerchief and his drawings in a portfolio.

He walked, barefoot, to Brussels. Offered an opportunity to return to the Borinage he remembered his rejection and preferred to go home. There too he was rejected, for his continual failures had frightened his parents into insisting he take a proper job; even his brother Théo held back from him, suggesting that he should draw but not interested in his evangelical fervour.

As he had come Van Gogh turned back again: to the Borinage. This time he was more utterly alone than ever before. He subsisted on charity, finding occasionally that he could exchange a drawing for some bread or potatoes. The winter approached and yet in the midst of its severity he survived; he was, it seemed, waiting to discover how he could live even while it snowed in the Borinage and when charity failed he had to scrape for food in the icy rubbish heaps.

Involuntarily, one day, the thought occurred to

him to visit Courrières, a small town close by in France. He explained the impulse as being a need for work. But at Courrières lived a painter celebrated at the time for his peasant scenes, Jules Breton. Van Gogh meant to knock at the door of his studio—until he saw the newly built inhospitable brick building of the studio. There was no need to seek further what he would not find; instead he saw in the church a copy of a Titian which struck him, and the light of the French countryside was a miracle after the dreadful greyness of the Borinage.

He returned to the Borinage, but in the spring of 1880 went home to Etten. The distance between him and his parents had grown too great to be healed. Fifty francs arrived as a present from Théo and he hesitated whether he should accept them. At last he did so. He had yet to write and thank his brother, to take up again their lapsed correspondence.

When he wrote finally, in July 1880, he was back in the Borinage, now the artist not the missionary; but, as he pointed out himself, these were not two different personalities.

He worked through the summer, copying other painters' work as well as recording what he saw in the Borinage. His object was now to produce good work that would sell. The autumn came, with its promise of melancholy. Suddenly, without warning, Van Gogh left the Borinage and arrived at Brussels. His father had now made him a small allowance and he could, just, afford to live in the capital. There he hoped to meet other artists. Théo, now at the

Goupil branch in Paris, could help him in this matter. Van Gogh began to work in the studio of another Dutch painter, some years younger, Van Rappard, son of a rich family. A kind of friendship grew up, modified by Van Rappard's pity and fear even though he admired Van Gogh who, in turn, wondered at the luxury in which Van Rappard lived. But in his studio Van Gogh learnt the elementary rules of drawing. Art urged him on, although he had bouts of illness and fits of irritation with Van Rappard, with other painters, even with Théo whose letters were overdue.

But he quickly forgave Théo when the letters arrived, and the departure of Van Rappard from Brussels in April 1881 meant the temporary severance of a real companionship. He too decided to leave Brussels. The cheapest lodging he could find was in his parents' house at Etten and as Théo was also going home in April Van Gogh hastened his own departure so that they should arrive at the same time. He had already had more money from Théo, through whom in fact came the small allowance which his father made him. And when Théo finally got back from Paris he congratulated Van Gogh warmly on his progress. From then on Van Gogh survived, materially speaking, through Théo's generosity, and his survival altogether was due in part to Théo's belief in him.

The summer was full of successful striving. Van Gogh paid a visit to a relation at The Hague, an older and famous painter, Anton Mauve; Mauve too applauded his work. At home Van Gogh's parents felt

that at last he had found his vocation, but they could not understand his drawings nor what he strove for. Also passing the summer at Etten was one of his cousins, a young widow, with whom he now fell desperately in love. This time a refusal did not content him; he besieged her with pleas to marry him until eventually she had to leave the rectory. His letters, which she did not open, reiterated the demand.

His parents reproved his insistence; quarrels broke out, and still he persevered. He followed his cousin to Amsterdam and when her parents refused to let him see her he thrust his hand into the flame of an oil lamp. The flame was quickly extinguished and, almost unconscious, Van Gogh was shown out without having seen his cousin.

This story soon reached the villagers at Etten. Besides, his quarrels with his father were now violent. Early in 1882 he moved to The Hague, where Anton Mauve found a studio for him. The gift of a box of water colours had altered the tenor of his art; colour is the great thing, he now wrote to Théo. He worked under Mauve at first happily but gradually with increasing rages which culminated in his smashing a plaster cast Mauve had set him to copy. A later meeting with Mauve after this incident only renewed the quarrel.

During this period of isolation he had met a prostitute Christine and her story touched him. He took her to live with him, as well as one of her children and her mother; she was expecting a second child at the time he met her and with Christine,

'Sien' as he called her, he savoured some realization of a home, a wife and family. Money was now shorter, and he recognized his total dependence on charity even while confessing to Théo about Sien. The ménage was broken up by Van Gogh's illness and he had hardly recovered when Sien, in hospital at Leyden, gave birth to a son. After their return to The Hague Sien lapsed into her old habits; Théo had already urged Van Gogh to leave her, and eventually there was no alternative.

The painter was now thirty. In the years that remained of his life there was to be no change in the pattern of constant movement and constant seeking for an always elusive equilibrium. When he left Sien and The Hague he spent some of the autumn in a bleak part of northern Holland, painting as seriously as ever. The sadness of the country and the oppression of his own heart forced him to leave. Before the winter came on he was home with his parents in their new rectory—the pastor again being given a fresh appointment—at Nuenen.

Here at least he had a refuge; he was received but he was not understood. Early in 1884 his mother broke her thigh and this accident was the occasion of a reconciliation; Van Gogh nursed the patient devotedly, but no sooner had she recovered than the quarrels and misunderstandings began once more and Van Gogh retreated into loneliness. An irony which barely broke this isolation was the attempted suicide of a neighbour's daughter, Margot Bégemann, who had fallen in love with Van Gogh. Van Gogh



would have married her but her parents refused to allow it and hence followed the attempt on her own life.

In the following year isolation increased. His father died very suddenly in March, just after returning home from a walk. Then he quarrelled with the Protestant and Catholic clergy at Nuenen, the latter afterwards forbidding the local people to sit to him.

In November 1885 he left Nuenen. At first doubtful where to go, he had at last fixed upon Antwerp, as the place where Rubens once lived. In a large city he would have opportunities to meet other painters, to study the nude, and he would be free from the weight of solitude. And at Antwerp he would see pictures by Rubens.

The city did not disappoint him. There were museums and churches, the pictures of Rubens which, though often too theatrical for his taste, excited him by their colour, and the docks with their exotic bustle that seemed to him like something Japanese. The atmosphere of Antwerp calmed him, while his health deteriorated and his poverty and hunger were assuaged by addiction to smoking. Anxious to have further grounding in technique, he attended the *École des Beaux-Arts* but the lessons seemed to him almost pointless and the work he produced baffled his professors. An altercation over his version of the *Venus de Milo* which he had been set to copy closed his attendance.

More than once he had asked Théo if he should perhaps come to Paris. Théo had counselled a return

rather to Nuenen. One morning at the Goupil gallery Théo received a note: his brother had reached Paris and would meet him in the Louvre at midday.

Accepting the inevitable, Théo shared his small apartment with Van Gogh.

It was Théo who opened up the world of Paris to him, Théo who had already managed to persuade the Goupil firm to buy some paintings by Impressionists. With Théo Van Gogh shared the life of Montmartre, to which district they had moved, privileged to accompany his brother as once it had been, in their childhood, Théo's privilege to accompany him. In a few weeks Van Gogh saw what new movements were active at Paris, for Impressionism as an impulse was breaking up under fresh influences, and as well as looking at the pictures Van Gogh could meet the painters. A rendezvous for many of these was the colour shop kept by a Père Tanguy—himself a generous friend of painters—who quickly became a friend of Van Gogh's. Tanguy introduced Van Gogh to a much younger artist, Émile Bernard; they too became friends. And he met Gauguin, who was to play a further part in his life.

So much he had gained at Paris. But as he stayed on he grew depressed at the lack of interest in his work; on seeing his pictures Cézanne had said, 'Honestly, you're painting like a madman.' He went to spend a summer with Émile Bernard at Asnières, but quarrelled with Bernard's father, packed up his things and left. Théo went to Holland for a few weeks and Van Gogh was alone in Paris, feeling old,

broken, finding the city insipid and the painters there mediocre.

He was growing eager to find a new source of inspiration; he thought of the South, the Midi, or even of Africa, the more desperately as winter returned to Paris. One day Toulouse-Lautrec mentioned Arles in Provence to him; life there sounded cheap and Van Gogh decided to go there. He thought of Arles as like Japan, the Japan of the prints he knew, a roll of which were his leaving present to Bernard when, in February 1888, he made his sudden flight from Paris.

At Arles he arrived to find it snowing. He took a room at the first hôtel outside the station and settled down to paint, waiting for the spring. And as the snow melted he found Arles so delightful that he felt he really was in Japan; the fruit trees blossomed, the sun rose higher and hotter in the sky, and he painted. Canvas and paints cost him money; the colours of the orchards in bloom, the grass, the sky, were almost painfully bright and he needed brilliant paints with which to capture them. But at last he was tasting the full intoxication of colour and light, until suddenly a relapse set in.

He was physically weak by the end of April, suffering from exhaustion, from toothache; he was frightened by the terrible uncertainty of his health and by the money he had cost his brother in the exhilarating few weeks of painting. At the hôtel the proprietor began to ask for further payments, on the pretext that his pictures were in the way.

Van Gogh searched, and found a studio, but he felt too weak to sleep there, choosing instead a café. When he tried to settle his hôtel bill it contained excess charges and only after intervention by a justice did the painter escape from the hôtel and its annoyances. He settled down to lead an austere and trouble-free life; he saw himself as a worker, and painting as his job.

He worked in the Provençal landscape that was daily growing hotter and dryer as the sun's power increased. Almost as by a mirage he was haunted by desire to see the Mediterranean, with its blue more intense than that of the sky; but week by week he postponed his trip to the sea at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer since he had not got sufficient money for the fare.

Another idea haunted him: that of a companionship of painters. He had already earlier in the year written to Gauguin—who was in Brittany—to come and live cheaply in Arles; but Gauguin did not hasten to reply. It was October before he definitely agreed to come. In preparation and welcome Van Gogh started to decorate the studio Gauguin would share with him in the yellow house; he began a whole series of vivid pictures, yellow and blue—a symphony in yellow and blue, he declared.

In Brittany Gauguin, cold-spirited, as passionately but less attractively egotistic, was wondering whether Théo Van Gogh had not thought up the whole idea of the two painters working together for some obscure profit of his own. Money was a focal point in

the sensibility of Gauguin; not for nothing had he been a stockbroker before he turned painter.

At last Gauguin arrived. It was the end of October and Van Gogh was perhaps more exhausted than he knew by the past eight months' loneliness and hard work. But Gauguin's arrival delighted him; the future was promising again, for Gauguin was interesting as a man and they would work together.

Gauguin was less optimistic, from the first. He did not offer any comment on the pictures that welcomed him and in fact he thought Van Gogh needed instruction in painting. He became Van Gogh's master; he set in order the affairs of the yellow house; he did the cooking, which Van Gogh could not; he managed their money matters. All this ascendancy seemed miraculous to Van Gogh. He wrote of his admiration to Théo.

But, unconsciously, he was far from submissive. Gauguin re-arranged not only his way of painting but his way of life. They now took evening walks together regularly, drinking absinthe and visiting prostitutes. Such a life was not altogether new to Van Gogh, but physically he bore it less well than Gauguin. Soon the strain of doubting his own art, even his own existence began to show in him; nor was Gauguin free from a tendency to tease him about Arles as a dirty little place, just as many of Van Gogh's favourite painters were poor little men. During a visit to the museum at Montpellier they quarrelled until the atmosphere was—in Van Gogh's own word, not a cliché—electric.

Once or twice Gauguin would wake abruptly in the night to find Van Gogh standing over his bed. 'What are you doing, Vincent?' he used to ask; and Van Gogh would go back silently to his own bed and fall into a deep sleep.

During the winter Gauguin had been working on a portrait of Van Gogh in which he was shown painting his favourite still-life, some sunflowers. On Christmas Eve Gauguin showed him the portrait. When Van Gogh looked at it he said: 'It's me all right, but me gone mad.'

That evening the two painters went off as usual to have an absinthe at the café they patronized. Without any warning Van Gogh suddenly hurled his glass at Gauguin's head. Gauguin ducked. He took Van Gogh by the arm, led him home to bed where he fell asleep immediately, waking in the morning to say, 'My dear Gauguin, I have a vague recollection of having insulted you last night.'

Gauguin, whose narrative is the only one we have for this scene and its sequel, accepted the apology but suggested that they should definitely part. He said he felt if such an incident happened again he would not be able to keep his temper. Christmas Day passed—what a day! Gauguin wrote some years after. After dinner he went out alone for a walk. He crossed the square and suddenly heard behind him a rapid jerky step that he recognized. Turning round he saw Van Gogh about to rush on him, an open razor in one hand. Gauguin looked him in the eyes. Van Gogh stopped, lowered his head and ran back to the house.

Gauguin did not follow. Should I have done so, he asked rhetorically afterwards, answering that his conscience was clear. He decided to spend the night in a hôtel.

Back in the house Van Gogh cut off part of his own left ear with the razor, washed it and put it in an envelope which he delivered to a prostitute he frequented. Then he returned home and went to bed with the shutters closed and a lamp lit.

The next morning the police arrived. At first Van Gogh was believed to be dead and during this alarm Gauguin—who did not know what had happened—appeared to collect his luggage. The group entered the blood-stained room; Van Gogh was woken, upon which he asked for his pipe and tobacco.

He was taken to hospital, quite insane. Gauguin left Arles without risking being seen by Van Gogh, but he had sent a telegram to Théo who hurried down to Arles from Paris. The doctor, Rey, a very young man, was touched by Théo's distress and by what he told of his brother, and took up the case with interest and sympathy. After some days of delirium Van Gogh's sanity returned; only gradually did the realization that he had been ill come, and then he wrote to Théo and 'two words' to Gauguin.

It was the New Year. Rey, who knew nothing of painting, suggested that Van Gogh show him and two colleagues his studio but, though he thought the painter recovered, the pictures were less easy to accept. Out of kindness he agreed to sit to Van Gogh for his portrait; out of gratitude Van Gogh had

suggested this gift. But what Dr. Rey really wanted was a reproduction of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, of which he had heard. That, Van Gogh told Théo, would make him very happy.

Early in January Van Gogh was out of hospital. Despite nightmares and insomnia, and troubles about the yellow house which was being let over his head, he felt cured: as much by the good news that Théo was going to marry as by anything else. He began to paint again a little: a still life, a self portrait or two of himself with his bandaged ear (since he painted himself in the mirror the bandage appears in these portraits over his right ear).

As for Van Gogh's portrait of Dr. Rey, this served a useful existence for many years blocking up an opening in the hen roost belonging to the Rey family. The family remained incredulous that the picture could possibly have value; after some adventures it has ended up in the Moscow Museum of Modern Art. The reproduction of the *Anatomy Lesson* was however preserved very carefully by Dr. Rey in his own study and there it still solemnly was when he died in

After a few weeks' work Van Gogh began to feel both exhausted and over-excited. He entered Dr. Rey's room at the hospital when the doctor was shaving one morning and asked to be allowed to shave him himself. Rey swore at him, and Van Gogh withdrew. A little while later, in February, he began to believe he was being poisoned. He had gone mad again.



This time as he recovered it was with the terrible knowledge that his seizure on Christmas Day had not been an isolated and unique bout. Madness had attacked him like a disease, and might manifest itself at any time. This tragic lucidity was an additional sorrow with which he had now to live. In the streets of Arles the children shouted 'madman' as he went by and threw stones. His story had been in the local paper, and the townspeople were equally derisory. Even the elements conspired against him, for in his absence rain had penetrated his yellow house and spoilt many sketches.

His hopes had gone; his own home was besieged by children trying to climb in through the windows. Fighting to preserve his life and his sanity, he sank again into madness. He recovered, but only to find that twenty-four citizens of Arles had petitioned the Mayor for his imprisonment. Dr. Rey was temporarily ill and therefore not at the hospital. Van Gogh was accordingly put in a cell, forbidden tobacco, and allowed to write to Théo only after innumerable formalities.

In fact he hesitated to write to his brother at this moment, despite his dejection, for Théo was due to be married in a month, in April. He finally wrote in reply to Théo's letter, writing as a sane man virtually in prison. But when his friend the painter Paul Signac came to Arles Van Gogh was allowed out; he showed Signac his pictures still in the studio at the yellow house—pictures that Signac admired—and the day passed in long discussions on art until Van Gogh

became over-excited and had to return to his seclusion.

The spring had come again in Provence, but this year he was not exhilarated by it. He had lost the will to strive; his brother was married, and that was enough. They would now write less to each other. Van Gogh had failed despite Théo's goodness: but that goodness will last, he wrote to Théo.

There was an asylum at Saint-Rémy, not far away, and Van Gogh thought of going there. Meanwhile he painted a little, but the colour of the Midi no longer stirred him; he produced some pictures, but they wither like flowers, he said. Between him and a complete breakdown of reason stood only Théo; without your friendship, he wrote, I should commit suicide.

Still sane, he discussed the cost of entering the asylum at Saint-Rémy, to which Théo advised him to go. At the end of May he went. The aspect of the place was terrifying, for the lunatics could usually be heard screaming and each was victim of a different aberration; Van Gogh was not frightened, he even felt a sort of courage and began to understand that madness was only a disease like any other. He had to be cured.

At Saint-Rémy he was allowed to paint in the grounds, and later, accompanied by an attendant, in the countryside beyond. He had once even gone as far as the town of Saint-Rémy, but the sight of the people and buildings had frightened him. Yet when he could not get out the asylum was worse with its dreadful boredom. For a book to read, he begged

Théo to send a Shakespeare, re-reading which he would find 'that heart-broken tenderness. . . .' which for him was hardly found in any painter except Rembrandt.

A retired ship's doctor, the head of the asylum had warned him that his stay should be long. Van Gogh arranged to return for a day to Arles and see about the furniture and pictures he had left there. He went to Arles on 6 July, and settled everything accordingly. A day or two after, painting not far from the asylum, he had another attack and was led back raving mad.

Slowly, after three weeks' insanity, he recovered his reason, this time more hopeless than before; he no longer believed that he could ever overcome the disease. But he took up, he could not help taking up, his paints; he worked through the summer, occasionally interrupted by another attack, afraid now that a last attack would permanently prevent his painting.

The autumn came. In November he made another trip to Arles. Despite his fear that this would again provoke a crisis, he survived the experience without an attack. But as the cold increased and Christmas 1889 drew nearer he dreaded a repetition of the attack of the Christmas before; and in fact he suffered two short paroxysms. As soon as he recovered he returned to painting: this seemed to offer him the best protection against the disease.

Early in 1890 a son was born to Théo and his wife. He was given the names Vincent-Willem, despite Van Gogh's wish that he should rather have his

father's and grandfather's name. About the same time Théo had sent down to Saint-Rémy the latest copy of the *Mercure de France*, which contained an article which was partly devoted to Van Gogh, a eulogy by the art critic Albert Aurier. A certain Isaäcson had already published in Holland a study of his painting, but Aurier's article achieved wider publicity and Van Gogh wrote a guarded yet grateful letter of thanks.

Soon after, the most prolonged of his attacks seized him. Not until mid-April did he begin to recover. He went out in the grounds of the asylum and found that he could still paint. Now he appealed to Théo to make every effort to get him away from Saint-Rémy and by May it was arranged. On the sixteenth of that month he left the asylum to take the train to Paris.

He had wired to Théo to meet him the next morning at the Gare de Lyon. Dreading some occurrence on the train Théo hardly slept and was reassured only by Van Gogh's arrival; Van Gogh on his part was shocked to see how ill Théo looked—and in fact Théo was dying. Théo's wife received them. Van Gogh saw the child named after him, and saw also while he stayed in Paris a number of friends.

But the world of Paris was soon too hectic for him. It had been arranged that he should go to Auvers, not far from the capital, to be looked after by a Dr. Gachet there, a good friend to painters. The two met and liked each other; Gachet recommended Van Gogh to paint away without worrying about his fits of insanity and the painter quickly took this advice.

He lodged at a small café but often went for meals to the doctor's house. The doctor himself was, Van Gogh said, eccentric and—writing to Théo—as ill as you or I. Van Gogh's pictures greatly appealed to Gachet, who sat for a portrait; as for his health, Gachet believed him to be cured.

So it seemed. At Auvers he was liked and respected. Théo, his wife, Jo, and their boy came on a visit one Sunday in June; and Van Gogh went down to meet them at the station with a nest—a symbol of the true life—for his nephew. He wanted his sister-in-law to come and stay at Auvers, bringing the young Vincent with her. And all the time he was painting more rapidly than ever.

But his mood of contentment did not last. It was replaced by calmness, a calmness of despair. On another Sunday, 27 July, he wandered alone into the fields about Auvers. He took out a pistol and turned it upon himself. The bullet missed his heart but entered his stomach. Then he walked back to Auvers, his jacket buttoned up, his hand over the wound, to the café where the proprietor and his family were expecting him for supper. Without speaking he walked in on them and went up to his room.

Worried by his failure to come down, the inn-keeper entered his bedroom and discovered what had happened. A local doctor was sent for; later Dr. Gachet, who had been in the country fishing, arrived with his son. Van Gogh asked for his pipe and lay the whole night through smoking.

The next morning Théo arrived. Van Gogh had

refused to give his brother's private address and a message had therefore been sent to the Goupil gallery. All that day Van Gogh smoked and talked fitfully with Théo; he asked what the doctors thought of his case and Théo said they were hopeful. 'It's useless,' Van Gogh replied, 'sadness will last as long as life.'

Early in the first hours of the following day, 29 July, Van Gogh died. He was buried at Auvers. The death of his brother was the final factor in Théo's illness; his reason eventually went, and he died in January 1891. In 1914 his widow brought his body back to Auvers and the two brothers were re-buried there, side by side.

Van Gogh's life is part of our modern mythology. Every society seeks assurance about life by having stories of heroes who overcome the most terrible odds which that society can conceive. There is an instant quality of sympathy—to us—in the story of Van Gogh's extraordinary life, as the many books upon him, pictorial and factual, the popularity of his paintings, and the choice of him for a film's subject, bear witness.

He was born into an age without patronage and into a society (much the same as present day society) which could well do without art. Apart from his struggle for sanity in such an atmosphere, he struggled to make people care for painting. And, in his own case, he has succeeded. Nor would this later success be a surprise to him; in fact his will to keep

going drew its fitful strength from the hope that he was really an artist. If so it would eventually prove itself for, he said, 'corn is corn, even if people take it for grass at first'. Although he could in the end bear the strain of existence no longer, even his death was witness to the cause in which he believed—as is a martyr's.

The possibility of being an artist always existed for Van Gogh, but it took him time to make the discovery that he was fitted for nothing else. Once discovered, the fact helped him to endure poverty, loneliness, and looming insanity, long enough to leave behind a great body of paintings at his premature death.

More directly than writers or composers painters are influenced by each other; Van Gogh's early pictures are full of obvious debts to the painters he admired, some of whom were, as Gauguin later told him, very mediocre. As a child he copied such work as was available to him through reproductions, and he was still copying with pleasure at the end of his life. I can assure you, he wrote to Théo in the winter of 1889, that I'm enormously interested in making copies.

It was in this way that he had started drawing. But the reality of the countryside round his childhood home at Zundert had fascinated him equally from the first; it was this reality of sky and fields and trees that he was to try to express, and the reality of things about us, as commonplace things as a room, a chair, some flowers in a vase.

Emotion guided him to these things. All his painting is the unleashing of a violent emotion, so violent that sometimes towards the end its force is still quivering in the picture it inspired. It was emotion that had driven Van Gogh, when he was a missionary in the Borinage, to make clumsy but passionate drawings of the miners' weary trek to and from the pits. When this existence in the Borinage failed and he was back despondent in the rectory at Nuenen, he turned for subject matter to the rectory garden under snow, to the peasants digging, or sewing, or shelling peas. His drawings and paintings were still rather clumsy, with a clumsiness that he fought to conquer, but they expressed already what he felt—they were creations in which he had succeeded in conveying to the spectator that otherwise secret emotion. A large picture of this period is *The Potato-Eaters*, which exists in two versions (one still belonging to Van Gogh's nephew): a group of peasants are seated eating potatoes, in a small room lit by a single oil lamp. It is more than just a reproduction of this scene; Van Gogh has described in a letter what he was trying to do: emphasizing that the hands which are now holding potatoes are those that till the soil. 'I have tried,' he told Théo, 'to convey a clear impression of the difference between their life and civilized life.'

In this sombre Dutch world of hardworking peasants, Van Gogh's pictures were sombre. When he moved to Antwerp it was to discover Rubens, Japanese prints, light and colour; from then on the



liberation achieved by colour excited him to newer and newer effects which culminated in the stabbingly brilliant pictures painted in the sunlight of Provence. From Antwerp Van Gogh advanced into the world of French art when he moved to Paris; for the last time he was influenced, and the pictures of Gauguin, Seurat, Pissarro, among others, helped him to discover in the end his difference from them all.

His instinct to fly from Paris was the right one. At Arles he could be alone wrestling with the emotional force of witnessing the bursting Provençal spring in which the colours, under the fierce sun, flamed before him. Even before he left Holland Van Gogh had been haunted by dreams of colour, transmutation of notes in music to emerald green and Prussian blue and yellow ochre. In Provence the colours danced and mingled together—for him—in a way that satisfied his dreams. In a letter he describes a walk by the seashore of the Mediterranean one evening; the sky was deep blue spotted with some clouds of deeper blue and some of a milkier tone, and on this blue background he saw the stars shine out, greenish, yellow, white, pink, a scattered series of precious stones. This has almost ceased to be reality, despite Van Gogh's care in observation; it has become a vision.

Perhaps he had always been threatened, and been aware of the threat, by insanity. Perhaps it was this which gave him such a convulsive attachment to what he saw, what *was*; as if only by painting them could he establish his place in a world which always threatened to be engulfed. His passion for colour and

light was the desperate hysterical passion of someone who is going into eternal blind blackness—struggling to pack into a few months enjoyment of the beauty that others will have many years to enjoy.

His portraits are uneven work, and often rather disappointing—except for his self-portraits. Here he turned upon the central problem of his life: himself. Nearly all painters, even those not portrait painters, have been tempted to the self-portrait; Rembrandt has left us that series of many moods, others have painted themselves in a moment of romantic self-love, or, equally lovingly, in a moment of misery. Van Gogh painted himself a number of times, with a disquieting directness: reddish-haired, red-bearded, a blunt ugly face, with pale narrow eyes uneasily looking out not at us but at Van Gogh. A sort of insanity broods over every reflection in a mirror, raising problems of reality. When a person looks into the mirror a self looks out at him, each image scrutinizing the other until between them there is no reality left.

The word reality states the theme of Van Gogh's life; it was against one kind of reality that he banged his head until it was too confused to guide his actions any more. Another reality lay in the world all about him, and to understand that he had to reduce it to terms on canvas. When he succeeded in that task, the result—as always with great painting—transcends the subject and yet forces it upon our attention with a supernatural vividness. 'Things,' Browning makes the painter Lippo Lippi say, 'we have passed Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see.'

Just such an ordinary object is the *Yellow Chair*, in the Tate Gallery. The picture is of a simple rush-seated chair, Van Gogh's own chair that he had in the yellow house at Arles. It stands full in the centre of the picture area, on tiles of orange, reddish-brown stone which slope up behind it to meet the inclined line of blue wall and blue door. The chair is solidly, three-dimensionally *there* against this background which is flat and decorative rather than contrasting planes of wall and floor. The lines of the chair legs are powerfully drawn in, heavily emphasized in sweeping strokes of blue paint, red paint, and shadowed by lemon-green shadows which convey the texture of the rough wood. And where the light falls most brilliantly in a picture that is all light the thick brush strokes of paint are a singing yellow, a yellow Van Gogh loved, boldly juxtaposed to the blue door and wall. It is more than a chair, and Van Gogh intended it to be more. On the seat he has put a pipe and a screw of tobacco in paper: they are the symbols of his unseen presence, asserting that this is *his* chair, but he himself is absent. It was not until after the first attack of madness that he finished the picture.

Like the stresses and strains of a building, the horizontals and verticals in this picture balance. But the structure of his pictures collapsed in the crises that followed; his last pictures are landscapes shaken by *frénzy*, in which the blue and green grass bristles and cypresses like black flames burn up into a stormy sky. Instead of the placidity of the *Yellow Chair* he suddenly, in July 1889, began to pursue the troubled

movement of cornfields: they too were more than just that, expressing as well sadness and extreme solitude.

He painted a last cornfield; in this the wheat seems to rise like waves whipped by the wind, swept into a huge trough and then tossed to the flickering thundery sky, itself spattered by the black wings of rooks. The two heaving elements of earth and sky meet and are confounded; the spectator seems to be witnessing a shipwreck, and in this whirling storm of cloud, birds, corn, all spinning into a void, Van Gogh at last went under. His life was over; for his pictures life began.

THE END

